

Regret and Forgiveness

by goose2989

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Summary: Mass Effect 2 centric story with Spartan B312 as a main character. While struggling to forgive himself and find peace, a certain Quarian may be the only one capable of showing it to him

1. Prologue

****Regret and Forgiveness****

****Prologue****

"**Happiness can exist only in acceptance" - ****_George Orwell_**

****BERLIN, GERMANY****

****JUNE 17****th****, 2557****

****OFFICE OF NAVAL INTELLIGENCE, RESEARCH FACILITY****

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Dr. Catherine Halsey sat anxiously as she watched the readings before her on countless monitors and screens. She had been at her station for over 17 hours, but she would not allow herself rest until her task was complete. The benefits far outweighed a few hours of petty sleep. She began to feel at ease until the back of her head was stopped with an uncomfortable thunk on her chair's low headrest. She silently scolded herself and rose to walk to the corner of the room, seeking more of the dark liquid ONI claimed as "coffee."

'_My Spartan project saves humankind and my reward is some freeze-dried garbage from a greenhouse in Iowa' Halsey spoke silently

to herself._

Granted, the good doctor was given all the resources she could ever wish for to pursue any new project of her choice, after her less-than ideal time spent in the Dyson Sphere of Onyx. She quickly shrugged off the memories of those lost there and returned to her desk.

"The results look very promising, doctor. I believe we can have a human test the device within a matter of days. Would you like to inform ONI that they should ready the volunteer?" asked one of the researchers.

"That won't be necessary, Thompson. I've already notified Admiral Hood that we can perform a test, with select leaders present for observation. That will unfortunately mean several Sangheili representatives will be here as well." Halsey stated with restrained disgust.

"They were the ones to find the data cache allowing us to start this project. They at least have a right to see how their investment pays off, especially when they willingly handed it to you for."

"I am well aware of the situation, _Junior Researcher_" she scoffed at the young subordinate. "I am grateful for their support in this project; that doesn't mean I have to smile and become their friend. As much help as they have been, remember that _I_ was the one who brought you on this project. Also remember what those _Sangheili_ spent the past 25 years doing to humanity."

Thompson nodded with a small amount of fear behind his eyes, quickly returning to his work of prepping the equipment.

_Catherine sighed to herself with both frustration and sadness. She longed to have Cortana working with her again. The AI may have been as snarky as a certain grey-armored Spartan III, but she never questioned the doctor. She could only hope the AI and the Master-Chief would be found soon..alive. _

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"_Distance is closing on this vessels refueling track with the Covenant super carrier. Seventy-six seconds until this vessel impacts its target." _

"_Dammit! So, it's gonna be like that, is it?" He turned back to the equipment to give it a firm slap, only to be rewarded with a rebellious beep. He turned around to face his companion. "Well I've got good news and bad news. This bird took a few hits during the last firefight and the thruster controls are shot, which means the only way back to the planet is a nice big jump."_

"_And the good news?"_

"_That was the good news Six."_

"_At this ship's current velocity, it will impact the carrier in 53 seconds."_

"_Yea yea yea. " The larger Spartan removed his helmet as he grudgingly accepted his fate. "Bad news is that the timer got fried too, I'm going to have to fire the slipspace drive manually."

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"_That's a one-way trip, Jorge."_

"_We all make it at some point, don't we? Better get going on that free-fall Six, they're going to need you down there in the fight." His tone now changed to a more somber one as he tore his service tags from his neck and handed them to his companion. "Listen Six, Reach has been a good home to me; it's time I return the favor. Don't deny me this."_

The larger Spartan lifted his friend and carried him to the end of the hangar bay, standing inches away from the shield that was keeping the cold of space from reaching out and grabbing them.

"_Tell them to make it count." _

_He watched silently as Jorge threw him out of the Covenant corvette, sending him plummeting towards the planet below. The ship silently drifted towards its target, the latter unaware of the danger that lurked on the tiny ship. A moment later the corvette began to shine a beautiful dark violet, enveloping the entire ship. A bright flash forced his helmet to polarize in an instant, allowing him to see the result of his recent actions. The entire middle section of the super carrier vanished from existence, leaving two pieces of the once great ship smoldering with boiling metal. A gentle shockwave of faint lavender light passed by him, sending a tingle down his spine. _

_He had failed Noble Five. _

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"Noble Six, please wake up. Lieutenant, the test is scheduled for the next hour" a calm voice called, waking him.

He jerked himself awake, looking about the room he was in before noticing he was sweating. His dreams, nightmares, had been doing anything but improve over the past few months. He quickly wiped his face on the starched cotton of his pillow and dragged himself up.

"I'm awake, Leliana. Please inform Doctor Halsey and Admiral Hood that I'll be in the armory within 15 minutes to dress. I just need a cold shower firstâ€|" he replied.

Before he could make it to his personal shower, the hologram stand by the doorway lit up with a human figure, roughly one foot tall. Her appearance was that of a pale woman, in her early twenties, with short, red hair reaching the middle of her neck. She was forcing a smile, poorly hiding her concern for the room's sole occupant.

"Very well, Lieutenantâ€|. I noticed your heart rate increase during the past hour of your sleep and you began to sweat heavily. You seemed very restless. Anything you would like to talk about?" Her question came off rhetorically yet politely, though she was smart

enough to not expect an answer.

"Thank you Leliana, but I'll be fine after a shower."

"You also seem to be suffering from the effects of alcohol poisoning. I would advise against consumption of such high amounts of alcohol before you sleep. Drinking several glasses of water would do you some good, Noble Six."

With her comment on his less-than ideal habit, he realized how bright everything seemed in the room, and the violent throbbing in his head.

He simply ignored the sincere AI's suggestion as he made his way into the shower.

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"Lieutenant, I would like you to meet Shipmaster Usze 'Taham. His destroyer and crew were responsible for the discovery of the Forerunner relic that allowed all of this to happen. "

"My thanks Admiral Hood. It is a great honor to meet you, Spartan. You have been highly regarded among my people since we have become allies." The crimson-clad Sangheili said politely while offering a hand.

"I'll just bet, Shipmaster." The fully-armored soldier sarcastically answered, grasping the Sangheili's hand in a firm shake to ensure his comment was understood to be friendly, albeit a bit disrespectful. Despite his humorous intentions, the young Lieutenant still received an icy glare from the admiral. "However, if you would excuse me, I'll be making my way down to the lab and prepare for the test run.

The admiral simply nodded, happy to be rid of the one Spartan who won't keep his mouth shut. The Sangheili pressed a fist against his chest in a show of respect and turned away from the Spartan. Despite the Spartan's friendly and outgoing personality to new people, military leaders better suited for the political landscape were beyond even his standards.

As Spartan B312 made his way down to the lab below the observation room he was just in, he ran right into the one person who he actually wanted to speak with.

"Ahh Noble One, I'm glad I ran into you before you made it downstairs. I still want to go over everything again with you" replied Doctor Halsey.

"That's good because, despite your best efforts of educating me on this yesterday, I don't think I could remember one piece of information if my life depended on it" he replied with a chuckle. Switching to a serious but polite tone he said "and even though Jun and I are the only members of Noble Team now, I still use my original call sign of Six."

"Everyone from Noble Team besides you and Jun are dead, lieutenant. You may have convinced Leliana and Jun to continue referring to you

as Six, but you won't be so easy to change me. Besides, _Noble One_, you need to move on from the past. You've done more than anyone else alive, and you deserve some peace. What happened on Reach was beyond even your abilities."

He simply nodded out of respect to her, listening to the doctor's opinion of his situation. "Now, care to enlighten me again, Miss Halsey?"

"Forget to refer to me as Doctor one more time and I'll certainly enlighten you on something. Well, as you know we have been experimenting with Forerunner teleportation technology ever since theâ€|. Sangheili retrieved the data core on one of their colonies."

'_Having to refer to those creatures with any sort of respect was despicable. They switch sides after slaughtering humans for more than 20 years and we just forget it all happened?_ '

"We have been able to create a prototype that can transport matter from one fixed gateway to another, instantly. While not as advanced as portals like the one leading to the Ark, which allow transport to any destination desired, I'm sure you can still see the potential of this."

"Looks like slipspace is going to be a thing of the past" he commented jokingly. "What kinds of dangers could I potentially face if this thing decides it doesn't like me?"

"Realistically the worst I would expect to happen is you get thrown on your ass as soon as you touch the portal. In theory, you could be sent to multiple locations; all at onceâ€|. Other potential risks include instant death or inter-dimensional travelâ€|. Don't worry too much; we've already tested this on a variety of smaller animals." She quickly added the last part as she noticed the look on Six's face.

"Well I guess that's what I get for volunteering for this job. I was just excited to be on Earth for a few days, away from whatever ONI had planned for me. But with that last revelation I think I might be looking for a way to forfeit my contract."

"We both know you wouldn't pass up a chance to test some new, dangerous equipment. Now put your helmet on and head down to the lab. The technicians should already have the portal ready. Just be careful."

"I'll see what I can do, ma'am."

Noble Six nodded with a smirk and sealed his helmet on, listening to the faint hiss as the suit pressurized him into his own personal climate of 72 degrees Fahrenheit. With that, he turned around from Halsey and made his way down to the open lab area, looking at the large, active portal in front of him. It was a strange sight, even after spending the past several days around the object. It was a tall, rectangular shaped device with the peak reaching about 10 feet in the air. It was relatively plain, no lights or moving parts, being made of a dull, silver metal.

'_For something that is supposed to make me instantly go to another

side of the facility, couldn't those techies at least make it glow or rumble?' _

"Lieutenant, would you kindly walk over to the portal and stand in front of it until we initiate the test?" one of the technicians asked politely.

He nodded, walking up to the object, tempted to touch the black wall of energy being projected inside of the frame. Thinking better of it, he simply turned around to look up at the observation window several floors above.

After listening to the scientists bicker with each other for several minutes, the portal finished its start-up sequence and began to faintly rumble with the additional power being fed to it

Hah! Maybe this day would be more fun than he thought...

"Alright lieutenant, the rest is very simple" Halsey added over the speaker system from her observation perch with the other military and ONI officers. "All you have to do is walk through the object."

Giving a lazy two finger salute, Noble six turned and walked to the portal before him. Simply admiring it a few moments, he gazed at the empty darkness of its projection. He briefly joked to himself if the team on the other end had forgotten to turn the welcome lights on, but dismissed the idea and walked up and began putting his hand through the veil...

"Son of a bitch! Noble Six, get away from the portal!"

"What the hell is going on!"

"Major power surge, the portal seems to have drained power from the MJOLNIR armor's power supply! Noble Six I said back away from the portal!"

He couldn't move. He was struggling with all his enhanced might and couldn't budge a muscle. The power from the object screaming through his body resulted in a pain the Spartan had never experienced.

"Dammit shut, down the portal! Cut all power to it!"

"We did already! It's feeding off his armor's power supply now!"

With that it let out a loud crack of electricity, shocking one of the researchers to the ground. It cracked again as it sent a shockwave through the entire complex, shorting all electronics in it. The Spartan could only watch in discomfort while the energy of the portal reached out around him, pulling him in closer.

Everything went black and the Spartan was left unconscious.

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Author's Note:

This is my first attempt at writing a Mass Effect/Halo themed fan fiction piece. I've read a few on here and liked the idea some had of merging Mass Effect and Halo, so I thought this would be fun. If you are expecting a noticeable amount of Halo elements in the story I am sorry; aside from this prologue and introducing Noble Six into Mass Effect 2, I have no immediate intentions of developing more Halo elements or characters into this, aside from flashbacks.

As I am new to this, I would be more than excited to have feedback on all elements of this story (writing, grammar, dialogue, battle descriptions, location descriptions, story direction, etc.) so please give me all and any ideas you think would be relevant to this.

The story will pick up roughly in the middle of Mass Effect 2, and I plan on developing a relationship with Noble Six and Tali during the story. As it would be odd for her to call him Noble Six the entire story, especially if they are to become love interests, I would appreciate ideas for a first name for our grey-armored Spartan III. Feel free to leave name ideas. And thank you for any other type feedback!

Just for some story information, Noble Six, Tali, Garrus, and Shepard will be the story's main characters, possibly Kasumi and Mordin. I'll try to incorporate others for specific chapters relating to loyalty missions and such in a way that makes each seem relevant. I also am considering leaving Zaeed out, as he and Noble Six are similar in that they are both straight-laced soldiers. Thoughts on this would be nice before I reach a decision point.

I thank Tairis Deamhan for writing "The Razor's Edge", nevertalk for writing "Reclamation", and LT Ashler for writing "Awakening." Anyone looking for a great story, check any of those

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REVISION NOTES:

Due to some detailed observations by a few readers, I have changed a few lines to better flow with the story. The portal scene in which Six is transported into the Mass Effect universe was altered slightly. Originally the out-portal was across the globe, spurring Halsey to request Noble Six to pick up some sushi. Since the portal was a test, it would seem more logical that the out-portal be located close by, in the same facility. This made me remove the sushi joke all together.

Also, due to Noble Six mentioning a new Noble team, I received a few messages asking if this team would attempt a rescue. Since the portal event was a complete accident, this would not be realistically possible: Noble Six is in the Mass Effect universe alone. I revised the scene to indicate on he and Jun are the team members, removing the possibility of any new characters. And unless I hear a huge outcry for Jun to enter the story, I have no intentions of adding him. This story is about Noble Six and Tali, Garrus, and the rest of the Normandy crew.

Since I was revising select lines, if you notice any mistakes in the story, please don't hesitate to mention it to me. Thank you, and enjoy reading!

2. Discovery

****STAR SYSTEM REDACTED****

****2185****

****CERBERUS FACILITY ****

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The lapis-blue star shining in front of his office was an amazing sight, even if he couldn't determine the reason for its continuous change in colors. Pockets of red were stubborn enough to hold out from consumption, but the brilliant blue of the star was close to swallowing up anything that resisted it. When he built his base of operations in the nameless system years ago, the star was an even mix of the two colors, constantly at war with each other. Only recently, probably since Shepard had been revived, had the blue began to show itself as the dominant. He hadn't paid any attention to it until now. Despite its apparent identity crisis, the star did provide the benefit of lighting his office in a way to his liking, negating the need for additional lights.

As he watched the star, contemplating the day's events, he heard a very familiar hologram warming up behind him. Waiting a few moments, he decided to return to the only item of furniture in the seemingly endless room, taking a seat and lighting yet another cigarette. He had important business to discuss, and not just things related to recent events on an isolated human colony.

"Shepard, good work on Horizon. You seem to be able to defy the odds time-after-time. Hopefully the Collectors will think again about attacking another human colony in the Terminus Systems."

"Don't get the champagne out yet, it wasn't a victory. Half of the colonists on that planet got taken by those damn bugs and I for one am not going to celebrate it. And you still need to find me a way to hit them for once. I'm sick of chasing them like their ghosts" Shepard replied.

"Despite your personal feelings on this mission's success, what you did was far better than anything else we have been able to accomplish. This is the first time we have even seen the Collectors, let alone able to stop them in their tracks. The data EDI recovered from their transmissions and salvaged equipment also proved to be extremely valuable. One thing we can be certain of is that the Collectors will be more careful, but I think we can find another way to lure them in" he replied.

"I had a bad feeling you had something to do with that attack. Ash said the Alliance got an anonymous tip about my dealings with Cerberus. You wouldn't happen to have any idea who sent that piece of rather timely information?"

The calm man simply took another long drag from his cigarette while studying the hologram of Shepard in front of him. Slowly exhaling the smoke from his lungs he replied "I may have released a select few carefully disguised rumors that you were alive and well, and working with Cerberus." He took another sip from the tumbler, slowly shaking the glass in his hands to swirl the ice and mystery drink. His blue synthetic eyes were staring at Shepard with little emotion or concern.

Shepard didn't enjoy the games one bit. His mysterious benefactor may have supplied him with a new Normandy and crew, hell he even set him up with a few old teammates. But the lies and deceit were getting old, fast. Shepard wanted a straight answer from his new boss more than anything the Illusive Man had already provided him.

"I seeâ€|what were you trying to prove? That the Alliance made a mistake giving up on me? Were you just trying to rub your ego into the brass? Or maybe you just wanted to throw some of the blame on me for abducting the colonists" he snapped back.

"Don't be so reckless or quick to judge, Commander. While you may never fully trust me, you have to at least see that everything I have done for you so far has worked out well. Most of it better than anyone could have expected. I suspected the Collectors were looking for you, or at least people that are connected to you. With Chief Williams on Horizon, now I know for certain. And that information will certainly help you too. It was a risk, but I couldn't just wait for them to take another colony. While you may be idealistic, I have no doubt you understand my actions now. Not to mention you did have the chance to see one of your former crew again, even if the reception was icy."

Shepard desperately held back a frown, slowly admitting to himself that the Illusive Man was right. Despite his methods of operation, he did get the job done. "Fine, but we have to ensure that no more colonies get hit like Horizon."

"I want the Collectors stopped for that very reason Shepard. You don't have to remind me of the stakes in this situation. That's why we're doing all this; why I am giving so much leeway on your mission. I'm devoting all available resources at my disposal to discover a way to safely travel through the Omega 4 relay. We have to hit the Collectors where they live."

The enigmatic man fidgeted in his chair, if only slightly. Taking another puff from his cigarette he continued his conversation with the man that so reluctantly worked with him.

"Your team is going to have to be strong Shepard. There won't be any looking back during this mission. You have to ensure their devotion to both the mission and you are unbreakable. The same also goes for you, commander. Is it safe for me to assume that you have put your past relationships behind you?"

"That's none of your damn business! While they may not be perfect, I am well aware that emotions need to be held in check for any mission to succeed. Stay out of my personal life. I don't bug you about the company you keep." He was becoming increasingly agitated, and now didn't mind showing it to the Illusive Man one bit.

"If it's going to affect the mission, I will remind you that it should be left behind. Once we find a way through the Omega 4 relay, we have no guarantee that you, or anyone else on the Normandy, will be able to return safely. You'll be sent to the Collector homeworld, and you all may well be killed before you can realize what's happening. The entire team will need to be committed to have any hope of survival. Even with that, chances are still slim."

"My team will be ready, that's one thing you don't have to worry about. We'll hit the Collectors with the best team this galaxy has ever seen. You talk about my lack of trust with you every time we speak, but you sure as hell don't seem to have any in me. And I'm the one you spent billions of credits to bring back from the dead. Who should really be concerned here?"

Shepard allowed a barely visible grin to become visible on his face with that last little tirade.

"I do trust in your abilities, and that you know what you're doing on this mission. I just want to be up front with your odds, something you seem to have had a history of ignoring, despite value to the mission." His voice became uncharacteristically concerned with the last statement. "I'm still working on the next set of dossiers, but I do have a mission for you, one that I can assure you has no meddling on my part."

"Alright, if you're being honest with me this time. What sort of mission do you have for us?" We're still orbiting Horizon so it may be a while before we can reach whatever destination you have in mind."

"That won't be a problem Shepard, the location of this is in the Dirada System, part of the Pylos Nebula. It's only one mass relay jump from the system you're in to the. The Dirada System is only a few hours out from the mass relay there so it shouldn't be any trouble. You'll need to land on the planet Canalus and search the site. EDI already has the coordinates needed."

"You still need to tell me what we're looking for. Or don't you know?"

"By now you should realize I don't jump into a situation I am unfamiliar. But for once your arrogance is actually right. About one hour ago an Alliance patrol detected an unusual energy spike on the planet's surface. The patrol ship itself doesn't have any orbital vehicle so they had to mark the area for another craft to investigate. It will still be six hours before the frigate assigned to the location will arrive."

"The energy spike on the surface was far too large for any random pirate or mercenary activity. The planet of Canalus itself doesn't have any significant amounts of element zero to make any natural occurrence either."

"So why are you so concerned with this? I don't think it can be anything terribly interesting, especially when we're supposed to be hitting the Collectors."

"I normally would have agreed with you Shepard, but this is the part

that concerns me: the amount of energy and area of discharge can only point to an element zero source. The only thing is, is that the energy readings were of a power source that we can't even analyze. We only detected the spike. I want you and a team to land at the site and see if you can find anything noticeable."

With that said, Shepard nodded politely, if only because his years in the military trained him to, and began to leave the hologram.

"Shepard, one more thing. This is even more of an unknown than the Collectors. You may be surprised to hear any concern from me, but be careful."

Before Shepard could respond, the Illusive Man hit a switch on his chair's control panel and cut the feed. He turned around to stare at the blue star bubbling with activity in front of his open office. For the first time in years, the man was genuinely puzzled.

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"EDI, tell Garrus, Grunt, and Mordin to meet me in the cockpit. I want to go over this new mission we have to deal with. And tell them to be quiet about it" the Spectre asked his ship's AI.

"Very well, commander. Would you like to notify anyone else? Perhaps Operative Lawson should be informed of the operation?"

"That won't be necessary, but thank you. I want her on the ship in case we have any problems on the ground with this one. Just tell the others I mentioned to meet me quickly." He decided he did need to tell one more member of the crew. "Joker? Do you have the location for our newest destination?"

"Aye aye sir, EDI forwarded the info to me. I set a course in before you were finished talking with the boss. Also, Canalus seems to have a lot of volcanic activity."

"What's your point Joker?"

"Well last time we were on a planet with volcanic activity, you and the ground team were running for your lives and I had to save your asses. And what did I get in return? You saying I had bad jokes! My jokes are always great commander!"

"Laugh it up Joker. Because you're gonna have to do the same thing again if we find ourselves in another suddenly-active volcano" chuckled Shepard. "Get us to Canalus quickly and quietly, and I'll make sure you get that heated seat upgrade you've been bitching about for the past month. I don't want the Alliance to know we're even close."

"Really commander? Wow, you know I'm actually excited about this one. You've got yourself a deal sir!"

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The inside of the Kodiak drop shuttle was noticeably uncomfortable. The small craft may be an effective way to get soldiers to and from the field of combat, but its designers didn't give a second thought to the occupant's comfort.

'_With all the technological jumps humanity's made over the past 50 years, couldn't some engineers at least make a drop ship with some reclining seats?' Shepard thought to himself. _

He silently looked around the troop compartment of the Kodiak. Directly in front of the commander sat Grunt, the tank-bred Krogan they found on Korlus. After his "father" was killed by those Blue Suns scumbags, Shepard and company decided to take the inactive Krogan pod onto the ship for future use. And it sure as hell paid off. Despite the restlessness of the young Krogan, Grunt certainly knew his way around a fight. When the bullets started flying, Shepard couldn't ask for a better walking tank.

'_I doubt anyone besides Wrex is tougher than this Krogan.'_

Or so he thought.

Next to Shepard sat his old friend, the Turian Garrus Vakarian. He was busy fiddling with the scope of his sniper rifle, his second most favorite pastime behind calibrating the Normandy's weapon systems. Garrus was too involved with his rifle now to notice the commander looking him over. The damage from their encounter on Omega was still clearly evident; Garrus had endured some serious physical and emotional trauma while they attempted to flee from entire platoons of three separate mercenary bands. The significant damage to the Turian's armor was more than enough to remind Shepard how close Garrus had come to leaving the world of the living. But, of course, that wasn't enough for the scum of Omega. Cybernetics and modest skin grafting on the right side of his face showed how determined the mercs were at taking Archangel down. Fortunately, Garrus is tougher than most Krogan can even claim to be, and the scarred vigilante didn't even let it faze him for a second. That is, until he inevitably decided to spend some time at Flux on the Citadel and prowl for some beautiful femalesâ€¦|

Sitting next to the window was a Salarian, looking significantly more aged than any other he had come across. Despite outward appearances, the scientist rambled on any topic as if he were a teenage girl that drank far too many energy drinks. This time, fortunately, the Salarian decided to go over data readings on his omni-tool, keeping quiet so far during the shuttle ride. While it would undoubtedly be short lived, the rest of the team appreciated the silence for a few minutes.

And how quickly those precious few minutes went byâ€¦|..

"Shepard! Readings from anomaly astounding! Power signatures suggest massive element zero source. Only known supply to generate amount in given area. Lack of element zero readings prove very interesting. Excited to see what we find." The professor hadn't even bothered to look up from his omni-tool while speaking to Shepard; he was far too interested in the possibilities of what they could find. "Suggests new form of energy, could be harnessed. Or could kill us all. Outcome unknown."

"Relax Mordin, it's been several hours since the Illusive Man intercepted the Alliance patrol data, and no new activity has been read since then. Whatever this was, it likely occurred as a single event and has since cooled down. If all goes well, we land, do some walking around, and find nothing but some useless anomaly we don't have to look twice at" Shepard answered firmly.

"Ugh, I hate this 'walking around' you small aliens seem to enjoy so much. We are a powerful team and we waste out time visiting worthless planets and doing the Illusive Man's bidding. Find us a worthy enemy to destroy Shepard." The team's Krogan companion was less-than excited about the current mission, unhesitant to voice his annoyed opinion to the others. Grunt smashed his fists together to accentuate his point, producing a quick thump.

"Relax, big guy. We just left Horizon and you already want more enemies to kill? I sure wouldn't want to get on your bad side" Garrus casually threw in his own opinion. He turned his gaze from the window to notice that Grunt didn't care one bit for his thoughts. But that never stopped Garrus in the past. "Don't worry; we'll have plenty more Collectors to kill as the mission progresses. And who knows with this planet we're heading down to. It's relatively uncharted, aside from a few companies scanning it for useful resources. Maybe we'll run into a Thresher Maw. I'm sure that would satisfy you."

The thought of having to deal with one of those monstrosities was more than enough to grab Shepard's attention to Garrus' latest pessimistic comment. Before he could chime in, however, the Kodiak began abruptly shaking and he found himself listening to the shuttle's local VI.

"Adverse atmospheric conditions detected. Shuttle occupants are encouraged to remain seated during descent. Advisory: Planet scanning has determined surface is more hospitable to organic individuals than current location. At current rate of descent, shuttle will arrive to preset location in roughly 312 seconds."

"Well at least it's looking out for us" Garrus stated bitterly.

"Warning: radar scans detect hostile ground forces in proximity to landing site. Enemy emplacements have anti-air weaponry. This shuttle will attempt evasive maneuvers. Occupants are advised to secure themselves."

"Dammit! Everybody hang on! Suit up now, we may get a hull breach!" Shepard yelled as he was already in the process of putting his helmet on. The other three team members were quick to comply; they had no reason to find out if decompression was painful.

Just as soon as Mordin had been the last person to seal his suit, the shuttle began to scream with warning lights and alarms and violently threw its passengers into the portside of the troop compartment. The sound of emergency thrusters activating alleviated any of the team members who worried they had already been hit with enemy fire.

"Hah! Looks like we'll get to kill something after all today. These vermin better be as skilled fighters as they are ambushers!" Grunt chimed in, making it clear he was the only one enjoying the rough

ride.

"That's assuming we get down without falling Grunt! I want everyone weapons ready as soon as that door opens up! Unload ASAP and find some cover. We'll analyze the situation after we assure ourselves some short-term survival!" Shepard was less-than pleased at how quickly a scientific discovery has turned into a battlefield. Shaking the thought off, readied his assault rifle to answer whoever decided to ruin his day. Just as he saw the landing zone through the shuttle's window, he saw a trail of smoke quickly curving towards the Kodiak. "Missile! Everyone hold on to something!"

Just as soon as he yelled the last word, the craft shook painfully as the sound of an explosion was followed by screeching metal. Even more warning lights flickered on as the shuttle dropped far too fast towards its target.

"Warning: enemy projectile has damaged the element zero core. Unsafe deceleration may occur upon landing."

The red sand and rocks of Canalus were quickly poured into the craft as they hit the ground, coming to an abrupt halt. Mordin was thrown into the door, and Grunt made a small dent into the front of the troop compartment with his face. Garrus and Shepard had managed to stay seated, and forced the door open, only to be greeted with small arms fire from several mercenaries. Mercenaries that looked all too familiar to the team

'_Blue Suns. Dammit, why couldn't it at least have been some random merc band that would quit before half their team was even dealt with?' the Turian thought to himself. _

The first two out of the downed shuttle opened fire with their Mattock rifles on the enemy positions, startling them enough to force them back behind cover. Grunt charged out next, moving much closer to the mercenaries and slid behind a few shipping crates. Mordin was the last out, activating an incineration blast on one unfortunate merc before crouching next to Garrus.

"Need to deal with Blue Suns! Numbers seems to be eight, plus two mechs!" Mordin fired a cryo blast a moment later, immediately followed by Grunt's shotgun blasting the now-frozen Batarian and shattering him into hundreds of pieces. "Correction, seven mercenaries!"

Garrus peeked around the crate that was saving his life and sighted down his rifle, finding a Turian at the end of it. Firing the trigger, he was rewarded with a cloudy mess of blue helmet and blood. "Looks like they're pulling back into that mine behind them!" We better chase after them before they get any ideas for traps and ambushes!"

Shepard nodded at his friend "Absolutely, but we need to take a quick look around to see if we can get some insight into what we're dealing with. Search those mercs for any holopads and I'll cover the door into the mine so they don't decide to come back out so quickly." Garrus answered with a nod, while Mordin and Grunt acknowledged with green winks on Shepard's HUD. As he made his way to the mine, he couldn't help but notice how familiar it looked like the one he found Liara in while hunting Saren on Therum. Scanning the rest of the

area, it was clear to him how hastily the mercs had set up shop here. Looks like they might have intercepted the Alliance patrol report too, but he doubted it. Even some of the most well-equipped Blue Suns outposts and bases had a great deal of trouble cracking Alliance codes.

'_Someone on that patrol must have sold it out for some quick credits. The Shadow Broker probably got his hands on it, and notified the Blue Suns of a significant find. For the right price, of course.'

—

"Shepard, found holojournal on dead Blue Sun. Should watch before moving." Mordin made his way over to Shepard and the other two followed suit. Mordin synced the data with his omni-tool, allowing it to be viewed easily by the others. Holding his hand out, the projection appeared in his palm and they all watched in interest. A Batarian in basic Blue Suns armor appeared, boredom and annoyance in his tone.

Entry One:

'_What a mess. Captain Anneius made us scramble to get here within hours from our outpost to investigate some strange energy spike. I don't even know how he found out about it. The only thing I do know is that there's nothing but red dirt on this entire planet. What a waste of time. We only got a team of 10 together, plus those two mechs. They don't help much besides drawing enemy fire.'

_Entry Two: _

'_Looks like this place isn't so worthless after all. After we made our way into the mine, we found the source of the energy spike: a human. Not just any human, though. This guy has to be close to seven feet tall, and is wearing some sort of armor none of us have ever seen. The captain wants the area secure before we attempt to move him to our ship. _

_Entry Three: _

'_Shit, looks like we've got some company coming to pay us a visit. Our scanners didn't pick up any ship in orbit, but we just discovered a Kodiak drop shuttle inbound directly to our location. The IFF pings it as Cerberus, so I doubt it's friendly. Those human scum don't deserve any more than what we are gonna give 'em. We're gonna try and shoot it down; hopefully we won't even need to draw our personal weapons.'

"Hmmm. Sounds like the energy spike was a human. Maybe that armor the journal was talking about is what caused the anomaly. I wonder what he was doing out here alone?" Garrus couldn't think of much else to say.

Shepard nodded in agreement, not forming any better opinions. "There were nine of them outside to greet us when we landed, and the two mechs. Looks like we'll be meeting this 'Captain Anneius' when we go into the mine. Keep your eyes open and alert, and we should take care of these fools before they can realize what hit them. If any of them decide they aren't paid enough to get killed on random planets and give up, incapacitate them with some concussive rounds. We don't need to turn this into a slaughter. that means you too Grunt." Shepard

looked at his Krogan team member with his last statement, making it clear he was serious about the order. Grunt simply huffed in return, grudgingly following the command. "Don't get too worked up, you can take point. Mordin, follow right behind him and incinerate anyone who loses their shields. That should be enough to scare the rest of the group for a few moments. Garrus, stay behind us and use your sniper rifle; any targets of opportunity, their yours. Let's move, we don't want the Blue Suns to get lonely, do we?"

The three others all smiled behind their helmets and began moving down the mine shaft, Grunt leading the way. Moving about 300 feet down the first tunnel, the team came into a small antechamber, with a sealed door to the left of them. It most likely was separating them from the remaining mercenaries, and the four stacked up to the wall by the door. Grunt held up all his fingers, making him able to count to three the way so many humans liked to. When he closed the last finger, he slapped the holographic door controls and they burst into the room, dropping an off-guard merc standing on the other side of the doorway. They were once again greeted by the sound of bullets impacting against their kinetic barriers, forcing them behind a set of crates only a few yards from the door they so hastily pilled through only seconds ago.

"Damn, these guys sure don't want us to get to our mystery man. Are you sure they didn't just set a trap for you, Archangel?" Shepard jokingly threw at his Turian companion.

"Well if they did, they sure as hell didn't do a very good job. I took out entire squads on Omega like this with just one of my teammates. I'm sure they learned their lesson by now Shepard!"

Shepard just chuckled at Garrus, always so quick to laugh at a situation that could just as quickly kill them. The flicker of assault rifle rounds on his shields got him to remember the fight they were in, and he threw a grenade disk into a group of Batarians on the other end of the room. The smell of incendiary paste in the grenade mixed with melting armor and flesh was Shepard's swift reward as three of the mercs fell to the floor. Yet another Turian found his end from a round of Garrus' Volkov rifle, accurately hitting the mercenary in the neck. He didn't even have the chance to grasp his throat after the round severed his spinal cord.

Grunt armed his shotgun and lowered his head as he charged into two humans foolish enough to try and bring down the angry Krogan. One was thrown to the other end of the room from impact, a sickening crack from more than one part of his body silencing him forever. The second rolled out of the path of Grunt's charge, only to find himself at the end of an Eviscerator and shredder rounds. Expanding eyes were the only defense he could muster as the gun's mass effect generator activated, sending serrated metal edges impacting his chest. After Mordin easily dispatched the two mechs with his SMG, a lone Turian raised his arms up higher than most of his species were capable, the rest of him shivering from fear.

This certainly wasn't the most disciplined group of mercenaries the team had encounteredâ€¦

"Don't shoot, I give up already! Just let me out of here alive and I'll tell you everything I know!" Captain Anneius shouted as the four

comfortable strolled over to him, surrounding him.

"Talk fast mercenary, we don't have the patience for hired guns today. Especially ones that try to kill us before bothering to open a communications channel with an unarmed shuttle." Shepard was happy they didn't kill everyone, but he would've been happier if they hadn't had this trouble in the first place.

"Unarmed? You Cerberus dirt bags never come into a situation wanting peace! I was doing the galaxy a favor by shooting at you!" The captain quickly sunk down after he realized he was insulting the ones who were now holding his life with a trigger finger.

"How did you find this place so quickly? What do you know about the human you found?"

"He's a big. Like seven feet tall big. He's wearing some sort of weird armor I've never seen before. Looks cutting edge. We didn't try and move him yet, so you four can have the privilege of doing that. I got a tip from the Shadow Broker. Called me up and said there was an anomaly in the area; our base is on one of the moons of Vioressa. We set up a staging ground for hit-and-run operations on merchant ships from Citadel space, moving trade resources with the Terminus Systems."

The captain's openness was very surprising to the team, but not unwelcome.

"When we got here, I didn't even know what to find. But I forked out half a million creds to the Shadow Broker, so I figured it was something big. And it was. This guy down here is something special. But he's all yours, if you just let me out of here alive."

The team looked at each other quickly, all nodding that they might as well let him live. No reason to let him go, though.

"Fine, captain. We'll let you live. But you aren't walking out of here." Shepard turned to Mordin an instant later. "Mordin, give him a sedative, and then we'll take him back on the Normandy and bring him to the Citadel. We can hand him over to Citadel Security for processing. We can give Councilor Anderson the location of that base, too. "

"What! You can't arrest me here! We aren't in Citadel!" He couldn't even finish his outburst before Mordin's sedative flowed into his system, knocking the Turian out cold. The team was rewarded by a thud of his head hitting the mine's floor, which looked quite painful; that was enough to cheer them up. With the surviving Blue Sun dealt with, the team decided to move through the last doorway between them and the target.

The next room opened up into a large cavern, a rough circle with a 100-foot diameter. A few pieces of scanning equipment with the Blue Suns' logo on them were hastily strewn about the room, around a small crater in the center. Shepard led the squad over to get a first-hand look at the single thing they just went through so much trouble to acquire. What they found genuinely shocked them, even after the descriptions they had already heard.

The human before them was roughly seven feet tall, probably just an

inch under that. The armor he wore covered his entire body; grey metal in thickness usually reserved for shock troopers. The entire layer underneath the plating was a black, rubbery looking substance. The entire suit of armor appeared to be vacuum-sealed. The helmet had a large golden visor, allowing much more vision than the typical Alliance helmet. No weapons were around the soldier; perhaps they had already been taken by the Blue Suns. This didn't look like a guy who travels around unarmed.

"Fascinating. Above-average sized human. Appears to be male, based on body shape. Armor indeed far more advanced than anything currently used in Citadel space." Mordin stated this as he scanned the man with his omni-tool. "Hmmm. No element zero power sources detected. Possible stealth system? No, suit too small to conceal even trace amount. Not possible. Appears to have hybrid of fusion-plasma power cells. Very advanced indeed."

"Wait, that armor he's got on has a fusion cell? The smallest fusion cell the Normandy has is the size of Grunt. How the hell does this guy have one in his armor?" Garrus had no intentions of holding his skepticism back. However, to the entire team, it was warranted.

Mordin simply ignored the Turian, continuing to scan the motionless mass of metal before them.

Shepard had no answers, like the rest of the team. He decided they should focus on something more urgent to them at the moment. "Mordin, can you get a scan on this guy's vitals? I want to know if he has any injuries before we try and move him." Shepard jumped in, while still looking in awe at the intimidating human.

"Unlikely. Suit has vital-masking devices. Also local AI proving impossible to bypass. No damage visible on armor. Assume he is fine. Oh, of course besides unconscious."

Shepard was taken aback by the professor's comment.

"Hold on professor. The fusion-plasma cells were enough of a stretch, but now you tell me he has an AI in there just for his combat armor? Are you sure your readings are accurate? Maybe it's just a VI? Shepard had a hard time believing him, even if he knew the Salarian didn't make mistakes like this.

"Please Shepard, not an apprentice technician. Computer interactions and behavior can only lead to AI. Not hostile, however. Simply denying any access to armor systems. No hacking attempt on my own system. Perhaps it is aware of its odd situation, wants help? Seems like logical conclusion."

The team simply stared at the man lying in front of them, unable to form any more words. Even Grunt had been unable to think of something derogatory to say about the new human. The only sounds they heard were Mordin's fingers rapidly typing at his omni-tool, gathering any information he could.

"Alright everyone, no sense standing around any longer. If nothing else, the sedative on our Blue Suns friend in the room behind us is going to wear off eventually. We need to get this guy back on the Normandy and get out of here. If the Blue Suns were so quick on the

scene, I don't want to run into whoever's next." Shepard looked at the unique human one more time. "Garrus, grab this guy and let's get out of here. Shepard to Normandy, everyone is fine, but we have two additions toâ€¦.Garrus let's go!"

"Ugh, having some trouble here Shepard. I can't get this guy to budge." Garrus was surprised he couldn't move the human.

"Garrus, we don't have time to play games, let's get out of here! I don't think he's welded to the floor."

"I'm not playing any games Shepard, this guy has got to weigh a ton!"

Shepard was about to yell at the Turian once again, when he noticed the look in his eye behind his helmet; Garrus wasn't exaggerating, not even a little. Puzzled, Shepard walked over to the human and tried picking him up. Even with the extensive cybernetics Cerberus had installed in him, he could barely budge the unidentified man. After a few more panting struggles, he turned back to Mordin.

"Mordin, scan the armor's metal and density; and check the impressions on the soil. Give me an idea of how much this guy weighs."

"Certainly, will only take a moment." Mordin's wrist lit up with an orange glow one more time, waving around the human for a few seconds. "Very interesting indeed. Appears to be made of an alloy of various metals. Extremely dense. Suspect it is very durable. Weight of entire system and occupant seems to be 1,000 pounds."

Garrus didn't even have time to drop his jaw before Shepard spoke.

"Did you say 1,000? There has got to be something special about this guy. I don't know any human who could even stand with a set of armor that weighs so muchâ€¦" Shepard was once again completely taken aback, unable to decide what to think. "It doesn't matter. Grunt, grab him and let's get the hell out of here!"

"Hmph. You humans and Turians are small and weak. Perhaps this one will be stronger, if what Mordin says is true" Grunt responded, eager to meet a human who was as tough as him.

Shepard watched as Grunt picked the human up and threw him over his shoulders. He was surprised to see that even Grunt had to think twice while picking him up. "Shepard to Normandy, we have the package and are returning to the shuttle. Have a technician team meet us in the loading bay, the Kodiak took some fire on the way down and I doubt the VI has completely fixed all the problems by now. We should rendezvous in 30 minutes. And alert Doctor Chakwas that we have aâ€¦unique patient that will be under her care soon."

"Roger that commander. Canals' atmosphere has been interfering with a lot of your transmissions but I got a good look at some of the video feeds of your helmets. What the hell did you guys find down there?" Joker was both fascinated and concerned with his question.

Shepard didn't answer the Normandy's pilot. What could he even answer with?

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><p>Author's Note<p>

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Well, chapter one is out of the way. I hope every one reading found it interesting. As always, I am more than happy to have any type of feedback on the story. Please leave any comments on the review page, or simply message me. Technical comments regarding universe technologies, backstories, etc are also greatly appreciated. I am always happy to revise chapters to improve the story.

Thanks for reading, I'll try to get the next chapter up by the end of next week!

3. Awakening

Author's Note:

Hey guys and girls. As always thanks for reading; reviews are always welcome so please write any thoughts you have. I am happy to steer the story in a new direction if I hear enough from you all for it.

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The room he was in was bright. Very, very bright. It reminded him of the augmentation room he had journeyed through before he was made a true Spartan. He felt it would remind him of a hospital, but he fortunately had spent little time in such places. He was glad he hadn't spent time in rooms like this. The white and grey walls were less than welcoming. Instead of dwelling on his surroundings, he just listened to the conversations of the strangers around him. He was comfortable resting on his new bed for the time being; he felt as though he had just run 50 miles, and drank a whole bottle of whiskey. No need to reveal his consciousness just yetâ€¦

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"Commander, I have attempted to scan him for any indications regarding his medical condition, but like Mordin, I haven't had any success. The armor he's wearing is proving difficult to even discover a pulse through. All attempts I have made to inject any type of medicine have alerted the onboard AI, in which case several red warning lights flash around him. The one time I ignored this, the needles simply broke on contact, even with the thinnest pieces of material around his hands. For your information, I was using high-strength, mass effect treated titanium that could normally pierce bone." Doctor Chakwas was getting frustrated with her new patient. He appeared fine, but still had not awoken. Her attempts to spur his awareness were fruitless.

"He has to wake up at some point. The onboard AI wouldn't be protecting him so much if he was in a dangerous coma; it would more likely be asking for our help. I don't see any other option than to sit here while he recovers from whatever happened to him. I don't expect any of you to stay, but I'm going to wait a few hours, and see what happens" responded Shepard.

Looking around at the rooms occupants, he saw Mordin, Garrus, Kasumi, and Jack. Doctor Chakwas had returned to her desk and was searching for other possibilities she had overlooked the past few hours. Mordin was back to examining his omni-tool, going over the data he had compiled while on Canalus. Garrus was simply relaxing on one of the medical beds, waiting to meet the Normandy's newest member. Kasumi couldn't stop staring, completely awestruck; it was as if the new human was some kind of alien she had never seen. Jackâ€¦..Jack was simply bored and wanted to see this "giant" that so many of the crew members had been talking about. Kenneth's loud mouth down on the engineering deck had originally grabbed her attention.

"I'm sick of waiting around, Shepard. When's this guy gonna decide he's sick of sleeping? I'm supposed to be meeting Grunt for a game of Skylian Five." The biotic convict was more than agitated at the pace of his recovery, and as always, happy to express her anger.

"Take it easy, Jack. He'll get up when he's good and ready. If you really have somewhere to be, I wouldn't be waiting around for this guy as long as he's just a paperweight. If you're really so interested in him, EDI will notify you once he regains himself. Otherwise, don't crowd in here if you're just going to complain about something we can't change." Shepard may appreciate Jack's talents, but her personality was still annoying and difficult.

With a look of disgust and anger, Jack stormed out the room and made her way for the ship's elevator, slamming the button for engineering.

"You sure know how to pick 'em, don't you Shep." Kasumi was smiling next to him, always ready to lighten the mood. "I've got to give you credit, though. This guy seems pretty impressive. It looks like he might even be able to pick a fight with Gruntâ€¦and walk away alive."

Shepard laughed at his Japanese friend, happy to have her with. Despite her young age and seemingly naïve and unprofessional personality, Kasumi was actually quite intelligent, especially aware of her surroundings and the people in it. But she was never formal, and proud of it.

"It's been twelve hours since the energy spike was originally recorded by the Alliance patrol. I doubt this guy is going to be sleeping any longer than that. We'll get to talk to him soon enough."

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"Leliana, you have my armor's external audio processing unit off right?"

'_I guess it wouldn't matter, now that I decided to open my mouthâ€¦|'_

"Please Noble Six; do you really think I'd be so careless? I knew once you woke up you'd want to discuss a few things privately with me. You were brought onto this ship roughly four hours ago. To be exact, 253 minutes and 16 seconds. This crew rescued you on a seemingly desolate planet. And it's a good thing they did; your armor's air supply was running dangerously low by the time we were in their shuttle craft. As you may have noticed already, there are two new aliens I have yet been able to identify. They were with the shore party that brought us onboard here. In addition, another member of the team was a much larger alien, but I have not seen him in here since we were recovered. Also, the markings on crew uniforms are not in any registry I have in my data core."

Six looked as best he could without turning his head and alerting the room's occupants. The alien standing to his left was a little taller than most humans, though it looked like Six would still look down at him. He was very slender, with long arms and only two fingers and a thumb. He was dressed in a white outfit with some red and black trim, and the coat tails made it appear as if he was some sort of scientist. The alien's head was slightly bulbous, with two large, black eyes. He looked a bit like an overgrown salamander to the Spartan. The numerous scars across his face made it appear as if he was a member of a combat organization during his lifetime. The second alien in the room was noticeably larger, although no taller than the first alien. He was wearing a set of combat armor, black and blue in color. It looked like it was better than even an ODS's setup. Of course, it wasn't in comparison to the MJOLNIR Noble Six was wearingâ€¦|. It was pretty beat up, however, as it had some gashes on the right side and a hole in the neck guard. The alien himself had what appeared to be metal plates over his face and part of his neck, a light grey color. A large area of his face on the right side had taken some pretty bad damage; his cheek and neck had a soft medical fabric attachment, and part of his mouth was badly scarred. Six also noticed the mandibles on each side of the alien's face, reminding him a little of an Elite.

'_Dammnit, I mean Sangheili! Ughâ€¦|at least I can try and be respectful to their race. They aren't so bad now anyways. They like killin' Brutes as much as any Spartan.' _

"Leliana, you've been watching these guys longer than I've been awake. I still see humans in here, so I'm not terribly worried we're going to have trouble. Have they tried doing anything to me since they brought me on here?"

"Not in the manner you are implying, Noble Six. While the amphibian-like creature tried to access my systems multiple times on the planet surface, it was completely harmless. He was only attempting to get a reading on you and the armor. The human doctor in the room here also attempted several medical scans, but your armor kept almost all of the scans from gathering any useful data. My own scans of you have not detected anything urgent, although you could use a meal. A meal these people would likely be happy to feed you. And a showerâ€¦| I don't see the point in waiting around any longer. I would recommend slowly getting up; we don't need to startle them, or make them wonder if you've been awake longer than just nowâ€¦|"

Six smirked a little at the last thing she said. She was right, like always. Now would be as good a time as any to introduce himself. Slowly, he raised his upper body from the medical bed he was in, grabbing the attention of the room's other occupants rather quickly. He cracked his neck, trying to play the part of injured soldier more accurately. He turned on the bed and placed his feet on the floor, still remaining seated on the bed. The others in the room waited, making it clear he was meant to be the first to speak.

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"Lieutenant B-312, Noble Six, of the SPARTAN-III program, sir. I suppose you have some questions for me. And I have a lot more for you than you would think."

The human male that walked over to Six looked him right in the eye. Well, right in the visor, to be more specific. He was dressed casually, but he held himself with confidence. He looked like an officer, one that demanded respect simply by being there. Probably the captain of this ship.

"My name is Commander Jonathan Shepard, I command the ship you're on now, the Normandy SR-2. We found you on a backwater planet named Canalus, and rescued you from a group of Blue Suns mercenaries. Hope you didn't have any plans on the surface, lieutenant."

"Heh no, and thanks commander, it's a good thing you found me when you did. My AI just informed me that I was running very low on air, so I might have suffocated before long if you hadn't shown up."

"Wait, you can talk with the AI in your armor?" The tall alien wearing the blue armor sounded more worried than surprised.

Six moved his head back slightly in surprise, then reached to the side of his helmet and removed a small chip and held his palm out with it. A young woman appeared in his hand, to the surprise of everyone else in the room.

"Hello everyone, my name is Leliana, UNSC serial number LIA 0452-7, and I thank you for saving my protector. I apologize for ignoring you until now, but I wanted to wait for the lieutenant to wake before speaking with you."

Noticing that everyone in the room had tensed up at the sight of Leliana, Six decided it was a good time to start asking his own questions. "Where exactly are we?"

"Currently we're in FTL, en route to the Crescent Nebula's mass relay to jump us to the Citadel. You don't know what any of those are, do you?" Shepard looked at the lieutenant and was not surprised to see him shrug. "I had a feeling you weren't in that cave to take a nap, lieutenant. I think if tell us your whole story, we can figure this problem out."

"Sounds fair to me, commander. I was at an ONI research facility in Berlin. We wereâ€¦"

"Wait a second, I'm sorry to interrupt you, but what's ONI? I've never heard of it. But said you were in Berlin, Germany, correct?"

"Ugh, yes sir. The only Berlin that I'm aware of is ONI is the UNSC's Office of Naval Intelligence."

"There, you mentioned this UNSC your AI did, too. What is that? And what were you researching at this facility, lieutenant?"

Surprised by the commander's quick questioning, he just answered to keep things moving. "The UNSC is humanity's central government. The United Nations Space Command. And we were researching teleportation technology. We had tried reverse-engineering an artifact we discovered on a colony to make instantaneous travel between locations with any amount of distance between them. Doesn't seem to have worked correctly, heh." He scratched his head at the last thought. "I guess this is a good time to ask what year it is. The head researcher at this facility warned me there was a possibility of inter-dimensional time travel. I thought she was just trying to scare me."

"I can't clarify what dimension you're in. Whatever that even means Six, but it's the year 2185. How does that sound to you?"

"Well, I'm not as shocked as I probably should be. But 2557 would have sounded a little better to me. June 17th to be exact, sir." Six just sat there, thinking about what would happen next.

Shepard was surprised at how calm the new lieutenant seemed. Of course, he had a helmet to conceal his facial expressions, and he lacked the energetic body language of Tali to reveal anything useful. He figured the soldier was a member of some Special Forces unit. Maybe he was trained to take tough news in stride.

"Maybe you were just thrown back in time, Six. Do any of the surroundings seem relevant to the late 22nd century to you?"

"Sorry sir, but no. You're two alien buddies here don't even exist where I'm from. You guys don't seem hostile; so are you gonna introduce yourselves?"

"Shocking suggestion, would never dream of attacking you! Unless of course, you attacked first. Then, wouldn't hesitate." The salamander looking alien seemed insulted at the very thought of unprovoked violence. "Professor Mordin Solus, Salarian, Normandy Chief Science Officer. Biologist, chemist, among other things." The professor waved his hand in the air during the last thought, then lowering it to Six's reach for a handshake. Six was surprised at the gesture, almost forgetting to accept.

Six then turned to the taller alien next to the professor.

"Garrus Vakarian, I'm a Turian. Used to be part of Citadel Security, but I suppose that wouldn't mean anything to you, would it? You'll learn about it soon enough, I bet. The commander and I go way back, joined his team a few years ago. On the Normandy, I'm in charge of the weapon systems, and you look like someone who'd be interested in that." Six nodded his head firmly, ensuring his excitement was shown. "Since I actually believe your story of inter-dimensional travel or whatever, and don't think you're some raving lunatic, I'll show you

the armaments once you get settled in."

Next, the senior member of the group stood up from her desk and calmly walked over. She seemed to be in her late 50s, though the years had been kind to her. Her short, silver hair was quite beautiful. And perfectly cared for.

"It's wonderful to meet you, lieutenant. I'm Doctor Chakwas, the Normandy's medical officer. You had us a little worried for a bit, but I'm glad to see you're awake now. I still expect you to remove that armor soon so I can do a thorough scan of you to see if you suffered any damage. And I don't care if you're 'just fine', the commander will back me up on this." Chakwas added the last thought when she saw Noble Six shaking his hand. Shepard simply shrugged at the Spartan. While he, without a doubt in the Spartan's mind, had the respect of his crew, the doctor didn't hesitate to perform her job.

'_She must have been a military doctor for a long time; if not her entire careerâ€¦it's good to see her take charge, even if it might get annoying at some pointâ€¦'_ _

Next, a small woman wearing black and grey approached. Six noticed she had a few very intricate make-up designs on her lips. She also wore a hood, shadowing much of her face.

"And I'm Kasumi Goto, at your service. Pleased to meet you, big man. I'll pick up some tech for you from our galaxy when we reach the Citadel. You might as well get used to being here, it doesn't seem like you can just flip a switch to get home."

"That's very nice of you Miss Goto, but I don't expect anyone to purchase things for me. When we get to this 'Citadel' of yours, I'll figure out what my next move is." Six was flattered by the young girl's willingness to help him, something he didn't receive much during a life in the military.

"Kasumi wasn't planning on purchasing any of it, Six. She's our resident thief, and a damn good one. But now that you mention you don't have a place in this galaxy, I'd like it if you stayed with us for a while. I don't know what your combat abilities are, but having an onboard AI and the advanced armor you're wearing makes me assume you're a member of a military organization, probably some sort of special forces unit? Plus, it won't be easy just becoming part of our society."

Before Noble Six could answer any of the new questions, the only person he knew in this new galaxy decided she had been left out long enough.

"Speaking of the onboard AI, I am right here, you all know?" Leliana was still in Six's hand, impatiently tapping her holographic foot. "Were you just planning on introducing yourselves to Six while I had to stand here and watch?"

The AI herself was enough of a startle to the occupants of the room, but she so passionately entering the conversation was simply something they couldn't even begin to plan for.

"Wellâ€¦ughâ€¦we didn't think we needed to say anything to you. We

aren't too familiar with AIs hereâ€¦" Garrus rubbed the back of his neck, still uncomfortable around the new AI.

"You don't seem too familiar with manners either, Turian. Care to explain to me why everyone here is so nervous around me? Does this ship even have an AI?"

"I would be glad to assist you, Leliana." The hologram stand by the medical bay's door lit up with a light blue image of a sphere, held up by what looked like its neck. The sphere was pulsing gently, and a white mouth flickered open and closed while speaking. "I am the Normandy's artificial intelligence, the Enhanced Defense Intelligence. The crew likes to refer to me as EDI. The galaxy we live in is very reluctant to use and distribute AIs, as most instances of creation have resulted in the deaths of organic beings. Virtual intelligences are much more commonly used; as they are not self-aware, they are considered far less dangerous than an AI like you or me. I am actually installed in this ship illegally, but our mission deems me necessary."

"You don't sound very emotional, EDI. Are you a 'dumb' AI?"

While EDI didn't convey emotions like an organic being, even a senile Hanar would have been able to notice that she was slightly offended by the accusation. "I beg your pardon, Leliana?"

"It's not an insult EDI. I just wanted to know the level of design you are built to. But since you don't seem to understand my question, I will assume you do not designate AIs the same as the UNSC. To clarify, I am a 'smart' AI, capable of learning and understanding information in a limitless number of fields. A 'dumb' AI would mean you were only capable of learning more in the field specific to your design, like military strategy, or a scientific study. I hope that removes any offense you may have taken from my question."

"That isâ€¦understandable. Thank you for clarification Leliana. I look forward to more conversations in the future." EDI's holographic image then flickered out with a pleasant sound.

Shepard, always able to adapt to new situations, only chuckled with the conversation he was hearing. "Well, before we get into any more fights, I suggest everyone return to their stations for the time being, until we reach the Citadel. Noble Six, I'd like to speak with you and Leliana in the starboard observation deck for a bit. I believe you will have many questions about the galaxy you're in now, and I would like to ask you some more questions. I'm sure you would be happy to know about everything you see here." Shepard motioned for Six to follow him through the doorway.

"That would be just fine, sir. Doesn't seem like I have much of a choice anyways." Why don't you lead the way, and we can discuss whatever you would like."

Shepard nodded in agreement, turning to walk through the doorway. During the quick trip to observation, Six noticed several humans relaxing in what appeared to be the mess hall. Based on the number of seats in the area, the Spartan guessed the Normandy wasn't a large vessel. Since they located him on what they called a 'backwater' planet, maybe the ship was designed for recon. With his advanced MJOLNIR armor system, he was able to hear several crewmembers

whispering about him from various areas of the mess hall.

'_That guy's big! You think he's even human in there?'_

'_Check out that armor, that suit has to weigh more than a Krogan!'_

'_Is he even going to take it off? We're not in a damn combat zone on the shipâ€|'_

Six chuckled quietly to himself, happy that the worst thing he heard was criticizing his apparel. While he was never xenophobic, even during the war, he was happy to see that most of the crew appeared to be human. The ship definitely wasn't big enough to be designed with Sangheili or Lekgolo in mind. Maybe they weren't even in this galaxyâ€|

When they turned the corner, the next door opened and the Spartan was greeted with a pleasant view of space, separated by only a few inches of glass. He noticed the blue shimmer around the hull instantly; this ship definitely didn't use a slipspace drive.

"Now that we can talk without half my crew slamming you with questions, let's start off with you, lieutenant. Why don't you ask a few questions before I do? You obviously have the most culture shock of the two of us" Shepard sat comfortably on one of the couches, waving Six to make himself at home. When he simply put his hand up to signify his desire to stand, Shepard remembered something Mordin had mentioned. "I'm guessing with that armor you're used to standing. Don't worry lieutenant; the seating anywhere on this ship was designed with weight being a factor. Krogans, one of the aliens in this galaxy, weigh about the same as you when wearing armor. Take a seat, we might be here a while."

Six nodded silently and slowly sat down on the parallel sofa from the commander. He was surprised when it didn't collapse under him, comfortably supporting him. It was a very welcome surprise.

"The first thing I noticed looking out the window was space. It may sound odd to you commander, but I'm not used to it. We use something called slipspace for FTL; it literally tears a whole into space and we can bend the laws of physics for whatever has a slipspace drive. Usually there isn't anything besides darkness in FTL, since we aren't actually in normal space. It's nice to see something out the window for a change."

Shepard smiled at his guest. At least Noble Six was looking on the bright side of things. "Our FTL is based on technology of a long dead race. We use something called element zero to create a mass effect field around an object, allowing us to lower the mass of something until we can accelerate to FTL speeds. Travel around the entire galaxy would still be impossible, but we also have objects called mass relays scattered throughout the entire galaxy. They allow us to instantly jump from one to another, but no organic beings created them. They are far older than we even know, probably hundreds of millions of years old. A race of sentient machines called Reapers created them as a trap for organic beings, but that's something we can discuss another time." Shepard made a quick nod to leave the topic closed, and he was happy to see the lieutenant had no problems complying. No sense in putting too much on his plate. "What else do

you want to know?"

"Based on the casual clothing you have, and the variety of aliens on your crew, it doesn't appear this is a standard military operation. What is your team trying to accomplish? Save the galaxy and all that?" Noble Six has never been good at keeping his mouth shut, and now wasn't any different. He picked more chattiness up from spending too much time with Jun.

"Actually Six, you'll be surprised to hear we are doing something like that. A race known as the Collectors are targeting entire human colonies, and we guess they've taken at least tens of thousands so far. They have small robotic drones capable of inflicting prolonged incapacitation to subdue the colonists, and advanced comm jammers to isolate the colonies before attack. My team and I are going to find a way and stop it. To answer your other question, this actually isn't a military operation at all. I'm working with a covert human organization called Cerberus. The Alliance and Citadel, humanity's galactic government and the greater galactic community's government respectively, are ignoring the abductions. Cerberus isn't a very reputable organization, but they are the only ones willing to help, which is why I'm working with themâ€|for now. I can tell you more about it another time. And that brings me to my first question for you: what sort of military training do you have?"

Noble Six simply laughed at the question, even if he knew the commander had no idea who or what he was. "Sorry commander, but I just couldn't help myself. Like I said earlier, I'm part of a military training program that creates SPARTAN-IIIs. We begin training at a young age; I was six. Around the age of 14 we undergo extensive genetic augmentation. Unlike the SPARTAN-II program before us, we had a near 100% success rate; only a select few individuals died or were rendered combat ineffectiveâ€|the IIs suffered more than 50% casualties during augmentation. After the augmentation, we are given our combat armor. The one I am wearing is the MJOLNIR Mk. VII, developed just in the past year at an ONI facility in Essen, Germany. I don't know what your combat armor systems are capable of, Commander Shepard, but the MJOLNIR system has full shielding, heavy reinforced armor plating, AI transfer protocols, atmospheric reentry capabilities, limited shield shaping, onboard medical programs, and EMP resistance, just to name a few. Reaction times are also greatly enhanced, thanks to onboard AIs and the crystalline layer between the internal padding and armor components. Between the armor and my own augmentation, I can react about five times quicker than normal humans. Actually, if a normal human like yourself even tried wearing this armor, you'd be rewarded with broken limbs and severe muscle extensions from the swift movementâ€| I'm also guessing you didn't just want to know all this for fun?"

Shepard has originally intended to steer the conversation towards his next goal, but something Noble Six mentioned wouldn't escape his thoughts. "You started training at the age of six? Were your parents in the military or what?"

"Ughâ€|.no. The SPARTAN-III program was started out of necessity from the war with the Covenant. It was an alien religious conglomerate in my galaxy. In short, they tried to exterminate humanity; we were deemed unworthy, or unclean, or whatever. They spent 27 years trying to kill us. Towards the closing days of the war, one of the most important alien castes in the Covenant, the

Sangheili, defected and joined humanity with groups of some of the other aliens. Turns out, humanity is the inheritor of their gods' legacy, and the Covenant leaders knew it. Only three hierarchs made the decision to wipe us out. All because they were worried about their authority being broken. The Sangheili helped turn the tide and we won the war. But I'm getting off track; the SPARTAN-IIIs were made to combat the Covenant. All subjects were orphans, victims of the Covenant war machine. We were given the choice to join and avenge our families. We were young, and we didn't know any better at the time, and I know it isn't pretty or nice, but humans literally wouldn't be alive in my galaxy without us. And I wouldn't change it, ever."

Shepard nodded in acknowledgement. Like the Spartan said, it was necessary. It didn't sound like his leaders had many choices. Besides, how many times had he done what's necessary during his military career? "Since I doubt your actual name is Noble Six, I'm guessing it's your call sign. Since you are numbered six, does that mean you have experience with a team?"

Six's good mood was quickly ruined with the memories that flowed through him. Jorge, Kat, Carter, Emile He simply sat still, silent for almost a minute, before he could even try to answer the commander.

"Yes, I have worked on a team. I'm sorry for being rude commander, but I'd prefer to leave that topic closed. I assure you my combat skills are more than adequate, even for a specialized mission."

"Fair enough, lieutenant. I don't need to know your every detail to understand what you're capable of. But answer me this: are you comfortable joining a new team?"

The question hit him like a brick. He knew he wasn't getting home anytime soon, and he did miss the company of the former Noble Team. Even though the scars on his heart weren't even close to healing, he saw the benefit of working with new people. People he could still protect. "Without hesitation, sir. I seem to be stuck here, anyways. And while we may have just met, you seem more than a capable leader. I hope you can prove me right. What do you have in mind?"

Shepard simply smiled from what he heard Noble Six say. The Normandy might just be able to pull the mission off. "Take a look around the ship, lieutenant. I'll make sure everyone knows you're part of the team now. We'll figure your sleeping arrangements out later. Head up to the armory when you're done; it's on the second deck."

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Noble Six had spent the past hour in the Normandy's armory, making himself familiar with all the new toys he'd get to play with during his new mission. Collector's, Reapers, Blue Suns mercenaries he didn't understand any of it yet. But he had time to learn all that later. He just needed to learn how to shoot them for now.

"Alright, lieutenant. Now that you've had some time to familiarize yourself with all the gear we have on the Normandy, let's get you set

up with a few weapons for you to keep in your own locker. Let's start with the assault rifles; why don't you pick one of these here." The Normandy's armory chief led the Spartan over to a table in the middle of the room, decorated with several makes of assault rifles.

"I think I'm going with the Mattock, Jacob. I'd rather have the accuracy. I can deal with any enemies that get too close for this to be effective." He lifted the large, beige rifle in his hands, and with the press of a button, it collapsed into less than half its normal size. "That's going to take some getting used to, but it's more than welcome." The Spartan was so happy he would be able to carry more than two weapons into combat. It was a dream come true.

"Yea, ha ha. I thought you might like that. That AI of yours downloaded some weapon schematics to my omni-tool so I could see what you're used to. Plasma weapons, huh? Sounds interesting." The African-American male showed a look of interest and excitement, unable to maintain his usually strict military demeanor.

"Yea, most of them are. After our war with the Covenant, our new allies shared weapons designs with us, and we implemented them over the past several years. Hopefully Leliana will be able to provide you some schematics for upgrades, maybe even new weapons? We'll just have to see."

Leliana's hologram on the table appeared then, eager to join in the conversation the included so much of her. "I'm still going over all the information EDI gave me, but the least I can do is help construct plasma grenades for the ground team. I'm sure you'll find those very interesting Mr. Taylor. They emit a small cloud of plasma to stick to targets like personnel and vehicles, yet won't stick to surfaces like walls or trees."

"That does sound fun, Leliana." Jacob smiled with the endless possibilities going through his mind. "Even if the rest of the crew is jumpy around you, I'm sure glad you're helping us."

"Speaking of which Jacob, how come you seem so comfortable around me? Everyone on this whole damn ship besides Commander Shepard thinks I'm going to eat them or something."

"Well, you already know why AIs are feared in our galaxy, I don't need to go over that again with you. As for me, the lieutenant here seems like a no-nonsense soldier, even if he is sarcastic and won't keep his mouth shut. If he trusts you so much, that's all the evidence I need to not worry about you."

"Can't keep my mouth shut? I let you two have that whole conversation without interrupting!"

Jacob simply laughed at the Spartan, quickly relaxing from his usual tempo. "I think someone is getting anxious to pick their next weapon. Right over here lieutenant and we'll get you set up with a sniper rifle. We've got a few choices for you, and all the rifles are suited for different situations."

Noble Six eyed each rifle carefully, remembering the performance of each one from what Jacob had told him earlier during his visit. "This blue and gold one, the Incisor right? I like the idea of rapid fire

in a three-round burst. I'll take it."

"Sounds good to me, sir. Come over to this table and we can get your sidearm. I'd recommend the Phalanx. I got them from a few friends of mine still in the Alliance military. Highly accurate, and each slug has enough stopping power to make a Krogan think twice about charging."

"Perfect. The pistols I'm used to in the UNSC were similar: smaller clips with large rounds. I'd rather make my shots count."

"Good to hear. Right on this table we have our shotguns. Mostly standard fare, but we do have a few Eviscerators that we 'borrowed' from some mercenaries on Omega. They aren't legal in Citadel space, but I doubt you're concerned with such things."

Six nodded, barely able to hold back his excitement at the highly-lethal weapon. It brought him back to his days of suppressing insurrections single handedly. "These are the ones with aerodynamic serrated shreds? A shotgun with accuracy is perfect; I like to fight close."

"Glad to see you're happy with it. The next choice is something I think you'll be very excited with." Jacob walked over to a larger container on the side of the room, holding some very unique, and expensive, cargo. "Normally the commander and Grunt are the only ones to carry heavy weapons into combat, but based on what you told me of your combat abilities, I think you deserve to be the third. The choice of weapon is yours Spartan."

Six looked down at the container before him, feeling like a kid in a candy store. A candy store that he owned. Several models were in front of him, each one with unique abilities and benefits. He looked at them all, resting his sight on a beautifully polished weapon that almost looked like some sort of mining equipment. "This one, the Cerberus Arc Projector. Sounds like I could have some fun with it." He smiled while thinking of what he could do to some bad guys with it. Before he could start talking again with Jacob, he was interrupted by a voice over the ship's internal speakers.

"Jacob, it's Shepard. We're just about to hit the relay to take us into the Citadel. I think now is a good time to let our newest team member make his way to the bridge. I think he and Leliana will be more than happy to see a mass relay in action."

"Well, you heard the boss Six. Better get up to the bridge. Brace yourself for the ship's helmsman, Joker. He's always ornery and doesn't hesitate to throw puns at anyone. Don't think that armor of yours is going to stop him. And I'll get all your gear setup and ready by the time you have your first mission."

"Thanks for the help and heads up, Jacob. I look forward to some action soon." They both nodded politely and Six made his way to the Normandy's cockpit. While walking towards the front of the ship, it really hit him how small the ship really was. The Normandy probably wasn't any longer than 150 meters and they classified it as a frigate. UNSC frigates like the Grafton and Saratoga were almost 500 meters long, and had significantly more mass. The spaciousness inside was welcome, though. UNSC ships were filled with equipment and personnel. Finding his way to the bridge, he was surprised to find

the Turian, Garrus, waiting for him.

"Noble Six, good to see you. Hopefully that little trouble between me and your AI won't ruin your impression of me. I'm glad to have you on the team, if you can only do even half the things Shepard told me about you." Garrus extended his hand to the Spartan, who took it and firmly shook to ensure no hard feelings were kept. "Anyways Sixâ€|wait, is that what you want us to call you? I'm fine with it, but seems like you would rather use your nameâ€|"

"Don't worry Garrus. I've used this call sign for almost five years now. Spartans don't usually share their given names with anyone besides other Spartans, even friends. If Six gets old, you can just call me lieutenant."

Garrus shrugged in response, realizing the Spartan wasn't going to tell him anymore. "Works for me. But back to the reason I'm here; when we dock with the Citadel, Shepard has some of his own business to take care of with Councilor Anderson. At some point I'm sure you'll meet him, too. In the meantime, he wants me to show you around the Citadel a bit, introduce you to how things work. We'll also pick you up an omni-tool and a galactic codex. Your AIâ€|errâ€|Leliana, can help you with both once they are installed into that armor of yours. We should only be spending a few hours, and since you aren't even registered in Council systems yet, I wouldn't recommend taking any weapons, even a sidearm. I doubt anyone will pick a fight with you anyways."

Before Garrus had a chance to tell him anymore, former Alliance Flight Lieutenant Jeff Moreau interrupted him. "Hey Six, if you're tired of listening to our resident hot head, we're about to hit the relay to take us into the Citadel. It'll give you a chance to see how we get around all futuristic like in our galaxy."

Garrus was about to snap back at Joker, but realized it would only give the pilot more ammunition. He looked at Six and nodded for him to look out the window. Walking up to a view port, the Spartan could barely believe what he was looking at. Right in front of the Normandy was a massive object; it sort of looked like a smooth tuning fork to him. In the center of the object was a massive blue ball energy, with two rings swiftly circling it constantly. The Normandy flew alongside the relay and was suddenly enveloped in a bright white and blue cloud, and even through the emptiness of space, the lieutenant could've sworn he heard the crack of electricity. Just as soon had the Normandy flown alongside the relay, they were now in a nebula, a mix of purple and white all around them. That's when Noble Six got his first look at the Citadel. Since he had never seen the Covenant's High Charity, this was by far the largest space station he had ever seen. If you could really call it that.

"That thing is massive! It isn't even a space station, it's a cityâ€|" Six was completely taken back by the sight before him. The five ward arms each boasting their own metropolis, all connected to the Presidium ring. It didn't look anything like a Forerunner construct, at least the ones he had seen. Whoever built this must be advanced.

"I'm guessing you don't build things like this where you're from, do you?" Garrus couldn't keep the smirk off his face while he said it.

"Well, the Covenant had this planetoid space station, High Charity. It was over 350 kilometers tall, and was much more rounded. The Citadel wouldn't even compare to it. But I never saw it; it was destroyed shortly before the war ended, and I wasn't present at the battle. But this station is the biggest I've seen in person." Six was still impressed by the Citadel, even if he knew his galaxy was capable of a bit moreâ€¦

"350 kilometers? Damn Six, you certainly know how to do it right in your galaxy. But we didn't build the Citadel, we just found it. The Reapers built it, but most people in the galaxy think the Protheans did. I'll tell you more about it sometime over a drink. But it sounds like we have a lot to share, you know, since you're stuck here anyways."

Six smiled at the friendliness and humor from his new Turian squad mate, but quickly became more solemn as it really sank in when hears someone else say he was stuck there.

'I guess if I'm stuck here, I might as well have some fun. Speaking of drinks, you got bars on this station of yours, Garrus?"

"Are you kidding me, Spartan? This station has some of the best booze you can ever hope to get your hands on! Like I said before, though, we don't have more than a few hours. We need to get you some new equipment first. But I'll tell you what; once we get your stuff, we can swing by one of the convenience shops and pick up some drinks to bring back on the Normandy. The rest of the crew would be happy to have it, too. Oh, and just so you know: Turian physiology is a little different from humans and most of the other races."

"Just a _little different_, you walking bird?"

"Very funny Six. I mean life on our home planet is built on dextro-amino acids. We can't eat the same thing you humans can, and vice versa. You try and drink some of the beer I bring back on the ship, and you'll have your face in the toilet even faster than you could if you were trying. Don't worry though; all food sold on the Citadel is clearly labeled for what races can consume them. And I'll be with to keep you company."

"Hey, if you're finished Garrus, we just docked with the Citadel. You can go now. Have fun trying to instate that seven-foot walking tank into the systems at C-Sec. I hope you still have some friends on the inside." Joker was even more agitated than usual. Maybe he was just jealous he didn't get any time for shore leave.

"Alright Six, we might as well get a head start on Shepard. He won't be with Anderson long. I have a feeling we're going to have some trouble getting you in anywaysâ€¦" Garrus looked down at the walkway and shook his head as the two walked into the decontamination chamber.

'_This is going to be a mess with C-Sec' the Turian thought to himself. _

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Author's Note

Phew! Almost done with getting Noble Six settled into his new galaxy. He'll still have catching up to do throughout the story, but aside from meeting a few new squad mates, he's ready to go. The next chapter is going to get a lot more exciting, I can promise you that. Six has to show off his combat skills to the team!

Like always, please leave me comments and messages with your thoughts on the story. Feedback keeps me motivated to write more!

And for those of you wondering, Six's whole history regarding his escape from Reach and feelings for each of his old team mates will be explained, piece by piece. No one in Mass Effect knows what Reach is, so I have a feeling a very specific Quarian will have to ask what he blames himself for so muchâ€¦

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Revision Notes

Thanks to undyinghunter and Robo Reader 21, I revised a few lines to follow Halo canon properly. Noble Six was not abducted like the SPARTAN-IIs, and I changed it to list him as a vengeful orphan. And I originally had Six telling Shepard that he had cybernetic augmentations, and fixed it to the proper description of genetic augmentations. Any more mistakes like this that you find, please let me know and I will fix them quickly.

4. Ambush

"Look, fellas. This is just a big mix-up. Ok, so maybe my friend here isn't registered in Citadel Systems, but that doesn't mean we're going to cause any trouble." Garrus and Noble Six both had their hands raised in the air. The sight of half a dozen Citadel Special Response agents in full combat gear and Scimitar assault shotguns can make even the meanest Krogan have doubts in their mind.

"You always were trouble, weren't you Garrus? No wonder you were always buckin' heads with the Executor." The sergeant leading the fire team seemed to know Garrus. And he remembered Garrus couldn't follow the rules. "You aren't a problem Garrus, just an annoyance. But yourâ€¦friend here is another matter. An unidentified civilian is one thing. Having a seven-foot tall human in military-grade combat armor is another. Give me one reason we don't shoot you both right now!"

"I'd like to see you try, Turian. I don't need a gun to deal with you." Six answered quickly, but he did so with a hint of amusement in his voice. Was he mocking the armed guards in front of him?

"Six, I told you to let me do the talking! Tullius, are you really going to shoot me? You may not like me, but you're smart enough to know I hate criminals far too much to try and pull something illegal off, especially on the Citadel. Let us talk to Bailey, and we will sort ourselves out. And you won't have any paperwork."

Tullius stared down the barrel of his shotgun, aiming straight at the human who just insulted him. He contemplated Garrus' suggestion, and while he already knew he was going to allow it, it still annoyed him more than Garrus himself. "Fine Garrus, but you better be ready to explain everything to Bailey. I'll be asking him about it later, and if he isn't convinced your intentions are good, I'll have you and your oversized friend thrown out an airlock. You have my word on that."

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"Garrus, you aren't making my job very easy. First, both you and Shepard show up after no one hears from you in two years. Shepard at least had a good excuse; he was dead! But you were off 'saving the galaxy', and just didn't bother paying your taxes. Getting you two reinstated in the system was easy, but I got a few looks from the Executor. Luckily, Pallin doesn't hate you as much as you think, and he still respects you, even if you are a reckless idealist. But this is just too much. Now you want me to completely fabricate a Citizen ID for a guy that won't even bother telling me his real name!" Captain Armando Bailey wasn't usually a man to let regulations slow people down, but this was a very unique situation. Even he was reluctant to help the former C-Sec agent this time.

"Look, Captain. I know this isn't exactly legal, but I can assure you Noble Six isn't going to be causing any kind of trouble. He may be new to Shepard's team, but I already can tell he's going to be very useful. Hell, he might even help you hunt down some local thugs on his next shore leave." Garrus gave a subtle twitch to Six to encourage him to play along with the last part. "We won't be spending very much time on the Citadel with the mission we have, so you don't have to worry about us for too much at a time. Come on, Bailey. Can't you do this as a favor to me?"

"I never said I wouldn't help, Garrus. But this is bizarre, for me even. You know I don't like when regulations hold people back from their jobs, but this is asking a lot. By the way, Noble Six, if you want me to help you with this at least tell me your name."

"I'd rather keep my real name to myself, Captain. With all due respect, Spartans don't usually use their real names unless with other Spartans, or certain superiors." The thought of Doctor Halsey always calling her SPARTAN-IIs by their first name made him laugh a little inside his helmet; luckily, she had always avoided calling him and the other IIIs by their names. Maybe she just knew how much he liked the sound of Noble Sixâ€|

"Fine, if that's how you want to play it, I'm not your daddy. But don't think it isn't bothering me. If I even do make this happen, and that's a big if you two, what will I even put in the system? Spartan B312 is not the most inconspicuous name." Bailey was still agitated but he was finally loosening up with the stonewalling from Six.

"If I remember right, Captain, the Citadel ID departments are run almost completely by Salarians. While they may be smart, Salarians have a notoriously difficult time understanding human names; I guess there are just too many cultures for them to keep track of. Chances

are, they wouldn't even think twice about reading Noble Six. Besides, I've met a few eccentric humans with some really weird names. That one guy, I think his name was McLovin? Even I knew that was fake, but he got through."

Bailey just sighed, both at the realization he was going to help these two trouble makers, and that someone would actually change their name to thatâ€¦ "Fine Garrus, you and you're over-armored friend here win. But I better find a very expensive bottle of whiskey in my desk before you two leave the station. I will need you to take that helmet off for a retinal scan before you leave though, Six"

Six was a little reluctant to remove something that had almost become a part of him over his life. It had become a part of him in some way. But he knew that Bailey was already doing him some big favors, so he stepped up to the desk and removed his helmet. Lucky for him, Garrus had gone over to talk with an old friend at another desk, and Bailey was so worked up already he didn't even bother to look at him more than to line up the scanning equipment. Six was always a little nervous around new people without his helmet. But just a few blue-light scans across his face were all the advanced identifiers used on the Citadel needed to add him into the system.

"There we go lieutenant; that should keep you safe. For a while, at least, but don't be surprised if some C-Sec Internal Affairs officers come asking you about some 'guy named Bailey.' If that does happen, I hope you and Garrus have the decency to say you hacked the system yourselves." Bailey couldn't contain a worried laugh while finishing his sentence. He stood up to shake Noble's hand. "If you're with Commander Shepard, I have no doubt in my mind you're doing something good. I don't know what you've heard about him, but the only reason this place is still in one piece is because of him and his original team. And Garrus was on that team too, so despite his sarcasm, he's a good man. Well, Turian."

"I've noticed, sir. And I appreciate all the help you've given us. I was worried for a bit I'd have to go to the treasury. Heh, taxes never were my thing." Six chuckled and offered a crisp salute to the captain, and Bailey was surprisingly quick to offer one in return. "If you'll excuse me, I'll grab that troublesome Turian and we can let you get back to work"

"You need anything else, lieutenant, and you let me know."

He looked around the station for a moment before he found Garrus, sitting on a desk with another officer, both looking out on Zakera Ward with their arms crossed, like they owned the whole place. "Good news, Garrus: Captain Bailey ran me into the system; he thinks I should be good for a while. He did say to 'keep that annoying Turian away from me, though'."

"Heh, and I thought I was the funny one in the squad. Looks like I'll have to work on my jokes to keep up. I wasn't too worried if Bailey would help, but then the thought of having to explain Leliana to himâ€¦that was what had me really worried. I'm glad she didn't show up on the scanners. Now that I think of it, why hasn't she complained about something yet?"

"Well, after we saw how jumpy people get around AIs in this galaxy, we both thought it best if she stayed on the ship. She's in the lab

with Professor Solus. Said she's working on some ways to integrate some of your technologies with my armor. Something about medi-gel and kinetic barriers. I don't get that stuff, that's why I let her tag along with me. Just don't ever tell her I said that; she'd pick at my brain next time I link with her."

"Link with her? What are you talking about? I thought she was just installed in your armor?"

"Yea, she is. But in the UNSC, all soldiers receive a neural implant; most get it just for IFF indicators and HUD displays to read in their own vision. But Spartans have an advanced implant that allows an AI to actually sync with our brains. It improves our reaction time and helps a number of other things. Being hooked up to Leliana like that allows her to make it feel like I have an itch in my head, if I bug her enough. Heh, luckily we're good friends and that doesn't happen too often."

"Friends with an AI? You're just full of surprises, aren't you Six? Well enough chit chat, let's get down to Saronis Applications quickly, I want to take you around the ward a little before we need to get back on the Normandy. After we get your omni-tool I've got a friend who owns a small liquor store in one of the back alleys. Not the prettiest place, but you'll be able to get whatever you desire, my friend."

Six was both excited and upset that the sound of getting his hands on some liquor was so exciting to him. He silently cursed himself before getting back into conversation with Garrus. "Thanks Garrus. You know, for an alien you aren't so bad."

"Coming from you, I take that as quite the compliment. I heard about that little war you fought in for most of your life. Those Covenant bastards seem like they were pretty mean. I can't believe you could even begin to trust an alien; even one as charming as me."

"Heh, I really hated the Covenant, yea. But it never came down to hating aliens for me. When the Sangheili joined us in the war, it made me realize the different species didn't really matter. To me, it was just bad people killing us. Relations with aliens are still tense, but I can't blame anyone for harboring a grudge, not after what happened. Even having diplomatic relations with aliens for the UNSC is incredible."

"I'm surprised to hear you treat it so calmly. But it's good, don't get me wrong. You'll have to spend a lot of time with aliens, just in case you didn't notice I don't really look like you. You did seem to be getting along with Mordin on the ship too. Did you work with a team during your war? I'm guessing it would have been called Noble Team?"

Six stopped dead in his tracks at the mention of the team. His team. He already knew Garrus would pick up on the shock in his movements. No sense in hiding it now. "Yes, Iâ€¦worked with the best team I could ever hope for. They were my friends. I'llâ€¦tell you about it another time, Garrus. "

Garrus was no stranger to the emotions going through Six's head now. He was all too familiar with what he assumed was bothering the Spartan. "Hey, I'm sorry Six. I didn't know. If it makes you feel

better, I think I've gone through the same thing as you. I lost a lot of friends too. My old team got killed, the one I was part of before joining Shepard again, after his resurrection."

'_Dammit, I just start to get the guy to warm up and I ruined it in a second!' Garrus felt like hitting his head against a wall._

"Don't worry, Garrus. I need to deal with it like a soldier. And I appreciate that you can understand how I feel. Like I said, I'll tell you another time. But something you just said got my attention: you said Shepard was resurrected?"

"He didn't tell you? Of course he didn't, you had enough to try and take in, let alone find out he's been dead for two years. A few weeks after we saved the Citadel, we were attacked by the Collectors. Just like the ones we're hunting now. Most of the crew of the original Normandy made it out. But Shepard got spaced rescuing Joker. Cerberus spent billions over the past two years putting him back together. He's not a clone or anything, either. He's the same guy as before. Probably why it cost so damn much. They felt he was too important to lose. Sounds like you still have some catching up to do, buddy."

Six barely could comprehend what Garrus told him, but was still sharp enough to realize the Turian had no reason to lie. And that Garrus wasn't quick enough to create such an elaborate story to mess with him. "Yea, it sure does Garrus. And it explains Bailey saying Shepard was dead for two years. I just assumed it was some undercover mission. But enough talk. Let's go get this omni-tool you keep talking about. I'm actually kind of excited. And Leliana will be more than ecstatic to get her, ugh, hands on the codex. She'll read the thing in seconds and can fill me in on all the different aliens and whatnot."

With that, Garrus led the way for the Spartan to follow, and they casually strolled through Zakera Ward on their way down to the next level to Saronis Applications.

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"Shepard, I'm glad you could make it. I'm anxious to hear about what happened on Horizon." Councilor Anderson offered his hand warmly, Shepard taking it without hesitation and they patted each other on the shoulder as friends. "I'm sure you're going to ask about her anyways, so I might as well come clean first. I authorized Ashley to go to Horizon and keep an eye on things. I'm sorry I couldn't tell you sooner, but working with Cerberus isn't exactly making the rest of the Council trust you more. And I needed to keep her involvement quiet."

"Don't worry Anderson, I understand. I don't think any more of Cerberus than you. I'm just glad the Council reinstated me last time I was here, even if it was just symbolic. I've already flashed my old Spectre ID a few times to get some things done." He chuckled remembering how he got a discount at the souvenir shop. "I doubt I can tell you any more about Horizon than Ash; what do you want to know?"

"Ashley was frozen up in a stasis field the whole time, she didn't

see much other than some of the Collectors walking by her. Mostly she just complained about you working with Cerberus. It sounded like you got the worst of that whole speech."

"Yeaâ€|she wasn't too happy with me and Garrus. It didn't help that my XO, Miranda Lawson, was there too and she strongly defended the organization. Ash calmed down a bit when she realized I wasn't thrilled with Cerberus either, but I doubt she's ready to forget it all. I just hope we can finish the mission soon, and I can cut my ties with Cerberus."

"I can't agree more, commander. But even you don't want to piss off someone like the Illusive Man. He may not be my favorite, but he is the only one who is actually getting something done about the abductions. The most I've been able to do is send Ashley solo on one mission. So much for helping you, huh?"

"Just having you try and help my good name is enough, Anderson. That's not why I came by though. I need to tell you about a new crewmember I picked up. We found him on Canalus. He'sâ€|unique, to say the least."

"What do you mean, Shepard? I've met some of your past crewmembers. Wrex can really desensitize someone. I doubt this guy is so different."

"Councilor, I'm going to need you to trust me on this. What I'm going to tell you about this guyâ€|it's going to make the Reaper story sound like something made up by a child." Shepard took a long, deep breath, having to prepare himself for the news just as much as Anderson. "This guy we found, he isn't exactly from our galaxy."

"Shepard, you should know I always trust you. Whenever someone doubts you, the Citadel gets attacked or rogue Spectres start running rampant. But you'll have to explain this oneâ€| It isn't something I can just accept immediately."

"We intercepted an Alliance patrol's transmission that said they noticed a weird energy spike on the surface of Canalus. We got their quickly, but we still had to deal with some mercs. Blue Suns actually, but they were unorganized and small. I already handed their leader over to C-Sec. When we got to the source of the spike, all we found was a guy in grey armor. But he wasn't just some normal guy in some combat armor. He's almost seven feet tall, the armor weighs 1,000 pounds, and he has his own personal AI, and its entire data core is just a small chip he can store in his helmet. He said he was testing some portal technology in his own universe, and I guess it went wrong. That's how he ended up on Canalus."

Anderson was staring at Shepard, a look of surprise, confusion, and curiosity on his face. "You just have to find all the trouble, don't you Shepard? Are you sure you believe this guy? Even for you, this sounds farfetched. He could just be fooling you."

"I believe him without a doubt. That armor he has, it is way beyond anything the Alliance could even hope to make with an unlimited budget. It's powered by a fusion-plasma cell the size of my palm. And that AI is fully aware and has a complete range of emotions. And they don't seem like simple simulations, she just acts that way

because she is that way. She's even a little snarky, heh. She yelled at Garrus when she first spoke to us because he wasn't being polite. She calls herself Leliana. Even an advanced AI we made wouldn't name itself something so I don't even know what to say to that. But I got some information out of him. He calls himself Noble Six; says he's something called a SPARTAN-III. According to him it's some special project where he comes from to make super-soldiers. He was recruited at the age of six, Councilor. I haven't seen him in action yet, but if what he told me about his abilities is true he could honestly take out an entire marine platoon alone. And I'm not joking, Anderson. I believe that. I'll try to get more out of him without making it sound like an interrogation. He's been very cooperative though. He seems to understand he's stuck here, and has no problem following my orders. He and Garrus are here getting some supplies as we speak."

Anderson put his hand to his lip, tapping them with his index finger while contemplating what he just heard. "Shepard, are you sure you can trust this guy? He could just be a spy from Cerberus, or something worse. Maybe even the Shadow Broker. I know you're a good judge of character, but this is some pretty ridiculous stuff you're talking about."

"I know it sounds bizarre, but I just have that gut feeling telling me he's good. His personality reminds me so much of a dedicated soldier, like you or me. As soon as I leave the Citadel again, the Illusive Man said he has a few more dossiers for me. I'll find out what Noble Six can do in combat, and I'll send you a message and any video logs we get with him. I think he'd be happy in the Alliance once the mission is done. He was a navy lieutenant in his own galaxy."

"You really are crazy, you know that, right? Heh, fine. Good luck with the mission. I hope to see you in an Alliance uniform again soon. And make sure you learn all you can about this Noble Six. If he really is from another galaxy or whatever, he might teach us a lot. Especially that AI you mentioned; it sounds like it could be really useful. I know the rest of the galaxy hates AIs, but we're both smart enough to realize how much they can help. I'll see you later commander. I'm always here if you need something."

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Noble Six was amazed at all the things he saw on the Citadel. The hover cars flying by at hundreds of miles per hour, the views of the huge city spread across the Citadel's arms, and the aliens. All sorts of different aliens. He almost had trouble deciding if some of them were just oversized pets. The ones that caught his attention most were something Garrus had pointed out when they landed. "Hanar" he called them. They reminded him of the Huragok back home. These Hanar didn't exactly float around the way the Huragok did, but their pathetic excuse for legs made them similar enough. He was surprised when one of them seemed to be drifting straight at him.

"Greetings, human. This one wonders if the human would be inclined to hear stories of the Enkindlers. They are responsible for all the wonders you see here."

"This one? Don't you have a name?" Six realized how ironic his question was and laughed loudly, quickly restraining himself when he realized he might mislead the oversized jellyfish.

Before the Hanar had a chance to respond, Garrus quickly interrupted the two. "Not you again! Didn't Shepard and I deal with you once already? We convinced you this was an insult to the Enkindlersâ€¦|didn't we? I don't remember; I just wanted you to shut up. Come on, Six before you get sucked into this preaching." Garrus sprinted off before either Six or the Hanar could question him, and Six decided to take his advice and ran to catch up.

"As annoying as that thing seemed Garrus, was that really necessary? He seemed harmless enough." Six was scratching his head at the Turian's sudden outburst.

"Yes it was. That stubborn jelly was a pain in the ass for Shepard, Tali and me once already. No need to deal with him again. Trust me, compared to what he hears from most of the locals, that was a compliment."

"Tali? I think Shepard mentioned her once back on the ship, during the time he was telling me about the Collectors and the first colony he found attacked. Sounds like you've both known her for a while."

"Yea, she was part of the original team. She's a Quarian, young but a brilliant tech and hacker. Energetic and curious as hell. She talks almost as much as Mordin, but she isn't nearly as annoying. And she can at least speak in complete sentences. She was such a fun girl, but she's on some secret mission for her fleet's Admiralty Board. Her father is the ranking member. Shepard ran into her on Freedom's Progress, the colony you're thinking of. If she wasn't so damn committed to her people she'd already be with us. She couldn't think of herself unless she thought it would help her people. The three of us were, _are_, best friends. You'd like her Six; we're getting along well already and she's far more personable than meâ€¦|Heh heh. I know the Illusive Man is using his information network to find her, so we can get her back on the Normandy. Hopefully it's sooner, rather than later."

"She sounds like a good friend I used to have." _Kat. She sounded a lot like Kat. Maybe not the energy and talking, but the young, curious tech expert. Other soldiers and civilians around the SPARTAN-IIIs never realized how young some of them were. Kat was only 22 whenâ€¦| If Tali is even half the woman Kat was, Six knew they would get along great._ "Hopefully I'll get to meet her soon. If this Illusive Man is as good as everyone thinks, sounds like we'll find her fast. Hey, what does a Quarian look like, anyways?"

"Good question, not many besides them know. They have to wear environmental suits all the time, they have terrible immune systems. You won't see many here on the Citadel; a lot of the people here look down on them, they all think they're a bunch of thieves. It isn't true, but labels stick. Plus they keep to themselves, staying out on their Flotilla except for their Pilgrimages. But that's something she can tell you about when you meet her. By the way, how do you like your omni-tool?"

Six looked down at his arm at the mention of the omni-tool. He lifted

his arm in front of him as if to read a watch. He was rewarded with an orange glow, wrapping around his entire forearm. "Seems useful. Once we get back on the ship, Leliana can sync with it and the codex. That will make things a lot easier for me. Your Salarian pal back at Saronis Aps was helpful."

"Yea, Marab was always a good shopkeeper. I knew him while I was working with C-Sec. And Shepard managed to get a discount for the whole team by recording an advertisement. Heh, if only Marab knew Shepard has done that at all the stores in this section of Zakera." Garrus laughed when he remembered getting discounts from all the shopkeepers, all so eager to have 'The Hero of the Citadel' in their stores. "Now if I remember right, I owe you a trip to the liquor storeâ€¦ It's right down this next alley. We might as well get Bailey's whiskey. He'll be a real pain in the ass if we just forget about him."

The two turned down their new route, quickly losing the noise and lights of main street Zakera Ward. Six noticed very quickly this wasn't the nicest part of town; some Turian and Human scavengers were holding their hands out to the pair as they walked by, and trash littered the entire area. Garrus kept walking, ignoring them completely. Six figured he might as well follow suit. It may be unpleasant, but that's how the galaxy worked. Around the next corner was something that caught both of them off guard.

"Well, well, look at what we have here boys. A Turian and a Human, and it seems like they aren't from around here. That's some fancy armor you have their, human. I bet it would be worth something on the black marketâ€¦hehâ€¦hehâ€¦heh." Garrus and Noble Six were suddenly greeted by three Krogans, armed with metal pipes. And they weren't plumbersâ€¦ Six wasn't scared of a few overgrown toads; he spent most of his life fighting aliens worse than them. But Garrus, for all his bravado, knew better than to simply start a fight.

"Alright pal, get lost. I've got a lot of friends in C-Sec, and I don't mind dealing with some trash like you. You keep walking, and we pretend we never saw you. How does that sound to you?"

"Hah! You think we're scared of a few C-Sec lackeys coming for us? You and your oversized Human friend here fork over your credit chits, and we won't break you skulls." The lead Krogan casually walked towards Garrus and opened up his palm; clearly, this wasn't the first time these Krogan had greeted strangers. But before Garrus could even reach for his pistol, he was interrupted by a grey blur grabbing the Krogan.

Six grabbed the pipe from the Krogan's hand, bending and warping it with a single movement. Discarding it to the side, he picked the thug up by the collar of his shirt and slammed him into the nearest wall. "You should've listened to Garrus, you piece of garbage." Before the other two criminals could react, Six dropped his right arm, as if trying to hit the air above the ground. Bursting from the top of his wrist was a blade of blue and white energy, a little less than two feet long. It faintly resonated with energy ripples, making it glow. He raised the blade near the stunned Krogan's eye, letting him get a good look at it. "I bet you've never seen one of these, have you? It's a fascinating piece of equipmentâ€¦can cut right through metal like it's nothing." To prove his point, he stabbed the blade through the wall the Krogan was pinned against. The metal of the wall slowly

heated, creating the smell of boiling metal, more than enough for the sharp nose of a Krogan to notice. "Yea, just like that. Imagine what it could do to a big toad like youâ€|"

The Krogan on the Citadel were nothing like those of merc bands, or even close to those still on Tuchanka. He clearly wasn't used to anyone resisting his requests. "Alright, I get it Human! We'll leave you alone! Just keep that damn thing away from me!" Six dropped the Krogan, and the three thugs ran without looking back for a second glance.

Garrus barely had time to raise his pistol before the Krogans were running away in terror. "Damn, Six. I never thought I'd see someone scare a Krogan, let alone three of them! Thanks for getting them off our backs; I don't think it would've gone too well fighting those dirt bags. What is that thing, anyways?"

With the blade still glowing from his wrist, Six raised it up so Garrus could get a better look at it. "It's a type-2 energy dagger. They were originally designed by the Covenant and used exclusively by the Sangheili. Their species was the military backbone of the Covenant, kind of like what I've heard about the Turians in this galaxy. After they separated from the Covenant, they shared its design with humanity so the Spartans could use it. Made carrying steel combat knives obsolete. A few Spartans refused to forget their combat knives, but we all still have these installed in our armor." Six released his clenched fist and the dagger disappeared with a wisp of white plasma.

"I can't wait to see you in combat, Six. You picked up a Krogan with one armâ€| Even Shepard could have trouble keeping up with you. Let's grab the drinks, and get back to the Normandy. I don't want to wait around to find out how stubborn those Krogan areâ€|they might have some more friends around here."

They took off at a brisk pace, quickly stopping at the liquor store to grab a variety of items. Six grabbed some boxes of beer for the crew, and a bottle of fine Scotch for himself. Garrus grabbed a box of Turian ale for himself, and then a few random bottles of vodka and tequila for the rest of the ship. Garrus used his Cerberus account to purchase all the items, and his friend behind the counter said he'd ship them to the Normandy immediately.

"Good to see you Garrus. Sorry to see you can't stay and chat for a while. I'll get this stuff sent up to your ship right away, though. And that bottle of whiskey for Captain Bailey will get to him, don't worry." The Turian behind the counter looked at Six next. "And if you're a friend of Garrus, you're always welcome back here. Hopefully you won't have to beat up any more Krogans when you come here next time, heh."

"Yea, me too. He may have been scared this time, but I doubt the big guy will remember his lesson for long." Six nodded to the Turian shopkeeper, while Garrus shook his hand and the two quickly left the store. Before they got far, they were both hailed on the team comm channel.

"Garrus, Six, get back to the Normandy double time. We have a call from the Illusive Man and he wants to speak with you, Six. I guess Cerberus' eyes and ears are more powerful than I expected. Once

you're onboard, we can take off and deal with the next set of recruitments we'll have."

"Got it, Shepard. We'll grab a sky car and get on the Normandy in a few minutes." Garrus motioned Six over to one of the same hover cars he had seen earlier. "These automated cabs can take you almost anywhere on the station within minutes. We can get back to the space dock quickly this way. And we don't have to worry about Krogans trying to mug usâ€|"

"Glad to hear it. I doubt Bailey would be happy if I caused any more trouble."

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"Shepard, good to hear from you again. I hope your time on the Citadel was well spent, because you probably won't be going back for some time. I've got three more dossiers for you to look in to, two of which are on the Asari world of Illium. That should save you some time." The Illusive Man was smoking yet another cigarette, casually sitting in his familiar chair. A chair that never looked comfortable to Shepard.

"That's good to hear, I want to get through these as fast as we can. We need to focus more on the Collectors. What can you tell me about the two on Illium?" Shepard was surprisingly polite to the mysterious benefactor. Maybe he just thought it would speed up the discussion.

That was probably it.

"The one I recommend first locating is the assassin. His name is Thane Krios, and he's a Drell. He's 39 and has spent almost his entire life in the service of the Hanar. He was used by them for tasks they simply aren't physically capable of. He's a relentless killer, and a skilled sniper. His infiltration skills should prove useful during the mission. While I do not have a detailed psych report, he seems to take his contracts extremely seriously; as long as you hire him, he should be dependable. The accounts I have for you should be more than adequate. The second is an Asari Justicar, who goes by the name of Samara. I have been able to find surprisingly little data on her, but I do know her combat abilities are extensive. She's had centuries to develop her biotic skills, and Justicars are known for their commitment to their missions. Once you convince her to join, I wouldn't trust her any less than your Turian friend. Convincing her to join you may be difficult, but you've surprised me already." He took a long drag of his cigarette, subtly signaling Shepard to make the next comment.

"Alright, the two of them sound useful. Now do you mind telling me why Noble Six had to be in our discussion too?" Shepard turned to his right, looking at the tall human, still in his MJOLNIR armor. The two looked at each other shortly, then turned their gazes at the man on the other end of the transmission

"Cerberus' information network is wider than you give us credit, commander. An agent of mine gave me a security camera clip from a back alley on the Citadel. It was taken less than an hour ago. You

may not know his abilities yet, Shepard, but your newest crew member can lift a Krogan with a single arm and pin it to a wall. His unique melee weapon is also completely unknown, even to me. Care to explain this, lieutenant?"

Six just looked at the man, almost for a whole minute. He was sizing him up; He wore civilian clothing, much like the ONI spooks he took orders from for much of his life. The unique location and untraceable communication made the similarities feel almost surreal. And the similarities weren't bringing the Spartan any warm memories. "Sorry Illusive Man, but unless the commander thinks you need to know the schematics of my equipment, I don't plan on sharing them." He smirked behind his mask. While he didn't know the Illusive Man, he was smart enough to know that someone usually in control would be more than frustrated at that response.

"While you may think you're being funny, Noble Six, I can assure you that I will find out anyways. I have no intentions of becoming hostile with you; I advise you to do the same." He stared at the Spartan with his blue synthetic eyes, almost glaringly. For all his might and skill, the Spartan didn't scare the Illusive Man for a moment. He just intrigued the man.

"We can argue about this later. You said you had three dossiers. I want to know who your third option is. I haven't heard too many good things about Illium from Garrus, so I hope the next one is somewhere better." Shepard interrupted the two, clearly agitated by the Illusive Man's gall to pretend he controlled his crew. Especially the one man that even Shepard didn't understand yet.

"You'll be happy to hear that I have located your former crewmember, Tali'Zorah. As you know, she is on a classified assignment for the Migrant Fleet Admiralty Board. Obviously, classified has never stopped me before." He smirked during his statement, with a cynical grin. "She and a small team of specialists and Quarian marines are on the planet Haestrom; it's deep within Geth-controlled space."

Shepard's eyes grew to unnatural sizes at the revelation of where Tali was located. "Why the hell would she agree to this mission? We have to get her now! I don't care how careful her team is being, that mission won't result in anything less than disaster if she spends too much time there. Joker, set a course for Haestrom, and get us there on the double!" Shepard stormed out of the hologram's range before either Six or the Illusive Man could say anything to him.

With the Spartan left alone in the hologram, he turned back to the man who was still studying him intently. "Take a picture, Illusive Man, You can look at it after I walk out of here. Or a holo, is that what you guys call it?" Six laughed slightly at himself, not caring if the other man could hear him.

"Despite your seemingly negative perception of me, I have no intentions of doing anything less than help you in this mission, Noble Six. Showing me some courtesy won't kill you. Besides, I can answer more of your questions than anyone else on the Normandy."

"Fine, I'll play your games. While Tali's skills may seem valuable, why bother spending so many resources on locating her? It doesn't

sound like it was easy, even for you. Another engineer or tech expert can't be that hard to find. What's so special about her?"

"I see you're very observant, Six. Shepard and Garrus Vakarian are both close friends to Miss Zorah. Emotional stability during a mission like this is extremely important, and having a close friend will help ease both of them. The two are important to the mission, and their stability is valued. Helping the two by providing more team members they can trust is simply a smart strategy; I'm sure you're familiar with the concept. I may not like aliens, but it's in the best interest of the mission. A mission that human lives depend on."

"Alright, I understand the move. But don't try and tell Shepard you're doing this out of the kindness of your heart; I doubt he'd believe it anyways. I've heard a lot about Tali myself, and I'm excited to meet her. But these Geth I've heard so much about; what can you tell me about them?"

"They're a race of machines that reside beyond the Perseus Veil of the galaxy. They were created by the Quarrians over 300 years ago and drove them from their own homeworld when they became fully aware. That's one of the main reasons most people in our galaxy fear AIs, like the one you have. While I understand their use, I would advise against making Leliana's existence known to Tali until she is adequately prepared. The Quarrians have an unsurprisingly negative attitude towards AIs."

"â€|Thanks for the help. But don't think a few bits of information are going to get me to hand you schematics for my armor and weapons. And don't even think you're people are going to get a chance to study Leliana. She'll help with your mission, as long as we both are on the Normandy." Six moved his posture slightly forward on one leg to accentuate his point, and then turned to leave the hologram pedestal.

The shadowy benefactor cut the feed to the hologram, and opened a new file with all the information on this new human he had. The list of technological capabilities of his armor astounded even him. The portable fusion-plasma cells, shields that were resistant to more than kinetic attacks, a portable AIâ€| The last piece intrigued him more than anything. EDI had already proven herself to be a valuable asset to the team, but she was stored in a core that took up an entire room. And from what the surveillance bugs in the Normandy's lab had shown, this new AI, Leliana, was even more advanced. Yet she was smaller than a credit chit. And she required no security measures or overrides for turning against an organic.

He knew better than to try and steal it outright; this Spartan had already demonstrated some of his combat abilities. And it was likely the AI had extensive firewalls. But he needed a way to acquire this new technology. The possibilities were endlessâ€|and he still had no idea how she was made. How did they give her such emotional behaviors? Did they somehow incorporate actual organic matter in its construction?

The man sat back in his chair, contemplating the information in front of him. The Spartan wouldn't share any of it, no matter how well the Illusive Man justified it. This would take all his effort to understand. But he had time. Shepard and other Cerberus teams were

taking care of everything themselves. He could focus on moreâ€|beneficial tasks.

He formed a malicious smile while thinking about the possibilities of things to comeâ€|

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Tali had spent the past two days fiddling with the equipment the Admiralty Board had provided. While it was better than standard fare, it was still less-than adequate for the current mission. Haestrom's sun was simply too violent for the equipment to work properly. She even considered having her team work at night to help avoid this problem, but they were tired enough as it was.

"Tali'Zorah, we were able to get some readings off of the last batch. It's clear to us now that Haestrom's sun is destabilizing prematurely. We think it had to do with dark energy, but we haven't been able to gather anything further. The radioactivity of the star is far too aggressive. We had to use another three sensor pods on that test, too. At this rate, we'll be out of sensor pods in another two days of study." The researcher was both tired and frustrated. Nothing had been going well on the mission.

"Thank you, Del. I think we'll be fine, though. We have enough data to make a conclusion, and with another day we can ensure the Admiralty Board will also believe us. As interested as I am in the buildings here, I'll be happy to get off a Geth planet." The sarcasm in her voice didn't help ease the tension, but Del had become used to how Tali seemed fearless around anything Geth.

Del hesitated for a moment, thinking about the next question that was lingering in the back of his mind. "Ma'am, if you don't mind me askingâ€| do you think this mission is worth it?"

"What do you mean, Del?" Tali wasn't a marine, and didn't object to a subordinate asking about a mission's value.

"I mean, think about how dangerous this all is. We're in Geth space. Even if their sensors are blocked from orbit, any patrol could come within 5,000 kilometers in the atmosphere and detect us. We aren't prepared for anything more than a few squads of mobile platforms. And if they have air support or any armature units, we could be in big trouble. Is information about a dying star really worth all our lives?"

Tali thought deeply about what she heard the young Quarian say. No doubt she had the same feelings since her father had assigned the mission. Despite having Reegar and his team with, she was more worried than she let the others see. And for what? Information about a star the used to be in Quarian space? Her people didn't have any use for this data; not in the short term, at least. They should have been spending time on Geth research. That's when she remembered something far more important than dying stars. "I understand your concern, Del. And while data about a star may not be immediately valuable, we are also salvaging valuable Geth material here. I've sent several caches back to the fleet already; I assume they will be used in disruptive hacking tests. Tests like that could help us in

retaking the homeworld someday. I believe you can understand the value in that."

"â€|Yesâ€| I understand Tali. I just wish we didn't have to sneak around Haestrom to do it. But I do trust you. You've done a lot since you returned from your Pilgrimage. I know we can count on you to keep us safe." The Quarian nodded to Tali, and returned to his station and continued analyzing the data from the sensor pods.

Tali became sick at the last thing he said to her. _'â€|keep us safe.'_ She had never been afraid to die for her people. But the thought of someone dying for her, the thought of her making a mistake that could cost livesâ€| that stuck her in the heart more than almost anything she could think of. _'Keelah, I never thought leadership could be soâ€|demanding. Arguing with Praza was a treat next to this. I wish I could ask Shepard for help.'_ _The reminder of the recently-revived commander brought some memories of better times back to her, and she made her way over to her desk and opened the journal.

"This place is amazing. Our ancestors walked through these halls with no masks. No air filters. They could enjoy the smell of the air, the stone, _the planet_. It must have been wonderful. I wish my friends could see everything here. I wish Garrus and Shepard were with me." She recorded her thoughts on the journal, intending them to be a reminder of the first Quarian planet she had ever visited. While she may be in constant danger, she was honored to have been chosen to lead a team to a former world of her people. Her thoughts were quickly interrupted by a familiar voice coming in over the comm channels. A voice that sounded far too alarmedâ€|

"Research outpost, this is squad leader Kal'Reegar, we've detected a Geth dropship heading straight for the ruins! I repeat, a Geth dropship coming straight for us! Tali, if you hear me, drop whatever you're doing and get to the observatory!"

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Author's Note:

Well here we are, Haestrom at last! I hope everyone was good with the chapter, and I'm excited we finally get to see Six in some real combat. Just as a heads up, I don't plan on retelling the mission to the letter. Having a Spartan alone is enough to throw a wrench in that. I haven't made too much progress on the next chapter, so any requests for its direction or content will be strongly considered if you mention them in your reviews or simply message me directly.

As always, I'm happy to have critical feedback. As long as you aren't simply blasting my story, of course hah. I have a special shout out to a few reviewers too:

Robo Reader 21, since you don't hesitate to call it how you see it. The feedback has made me pay more attention to details. I'll keep them in mind during future chapters.

GodzillaMaster, your mention of the increased security made me revise the intro paragraphs.

Tairis Deamhan, for extra support and the inspiration of Razor's Edge.

WOLF, for constantly adding numerous suggestions. I promise I'll incorporate something of yours during the story.

Regarding Noble Six's appearance: while the Mark VII is never featured in a game, I will eventually describe his appearance with more depth. But I will likely be using the default Reach appearance as my basis; it's still my favorite setup, even with all the unlockable upgrades.

5. Rescue

Author's Note:

Thank you everybody for reading still. I didn't know what to expect when starting this and all the support has really kept me going. This isn't easy writing, and I fully intend to finish this with a full 100,000+ words story. Just don't expect me to finish it in the next two months.

This is the first true combat chapter, so any tips on describing battles would be great. I'm reading through some Halo novels again for help, but your comments are always welcome.

For future use, I still want any comments on a name for Six. While I actually _don't_ want to name him, writing an intimate moment with Tali referring to him as Noble Six would just be silly. Write name suggestions in reviews or message me.

As for Six's personality, over the course of the story I plan on portraying him much like Jun, comical and always chatty with those around him, but more conflicted and distraught during private conversations with Tali, Garrus, and Leliana. Thoughts on that approach would be EXTREMELY helpful.

As always, reviews are very helpful to me for writing. Keep them coming, even if you aren't sure if you have a good idea. I listen more than you think.

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"EDI, inform the ground team that I want to see them in the briefing room in the next 15 minutes. We have a lot to go over." Shepard had been anxious ever since the Illusive Man had informed him of Tali's whereabouts. While it didn't surprise him that she would agree to the mission, he was concerned that the Admiralty Board would willingly send a team deep into Geth-controlled space. How could her own father assign Tali to a mission that would likely result in her death? He had never met the man, but Shepard could already tell they don't think the same way. Shepard always looked for alternatives to sacrificing people, and this was the complete opposite.

"Very well, commanderâ€¦ I have alerted the entire team and they will join you within 15 minutes. Would you like anything else?" The blue

hologram by his room's door pulsed gently with the faceless avatar EDI used.

"No, thank you EDI. Just make sure Joker keeps the ship cloaked during the entire mission. Only reveal the Normandy if I order it or it's absolutely necessary. As soon as we reach the planet, scan the surrounding space for Geth patrols." Shepard stated this as he was already in the elevator, cursing its slow speed to reach the CIC.

The doors opened up to the CIC, and Shepard didn't even bother speaking to Kelly as he jogged around the corner through the armory. Jacob was still fiddling with some disruptor mods when he walked by; that's fine, because they may need the extra firepower. He made his way around the next corner into the briefing room, and was surprised that he only saw a single person occupying it. But, it was someone he was happy to have a private conversation with.

"Noble Six, I'm glad you got here first. I wanted to talk to you about the new mission, and some other things."

"Other things? What's the problem, commander?" The Spartan walked over to Shepard, obviously realizing the commander had something specific to discuss.

"I wanted to thank you for joining the mission, first off. Garrus told me about your little run-in with those Krogan on the Citadel. I'm more than impressed, but I'm glad you didn't actually try and kill them. I hope that means you know you can't always shoot first."

"Of course, sir. After the trouble we had getting onto the station, I figured causing more trouble like that would earn me a swift trip out an airlock. And they looked like they could be a handful if I decided to pick a real fight. Now what did you really want to talk about, if you don't mind me asking?"

"You don't waste time, do you lieutenant? That's fine; we don't need to play games. I was wondering about your commitment to this mission. You've been very accepting of me and the crew so far. I couldn't have asked for a better response considering what you went through. But as you can imagine, it's a bit odd to see you accept all this so quickly."

Six knew something like this was going to come up. He already started getting along with Garrus, something that even surprised him a little. No doubt Shepard had thought about it already. "I understand, Shepard. I was surprised you didn't lock me up as soon as I woke up, and I appreciate it. I realize it was all fast, but Spartans can process things quickly. I just figured that I'm not going home any time soon, and Leliana agreed with me, speaking of which." He reached to the side of his helmet and removed the data chip and held it in his hand again, Leliana's avatar appearing for Shepard to see. "She might as well speak her mind too."

"You always are such a gentleman, Noble Six." She smirked a little, and then looked at the commander. "I agree with the lieutenant, Shepard. We're stuck here, and you seem like a unique leader. We need something to do, and stopping kidnapping aliens and rescuing damsels in distress seems fitting. What's this Tali girl like?"

"She's a Quarian, and that's one of the things I wanted to talk about. I'm sure by now both of you have read the codex enough to learn a little about Quarrians and their history with AIs. If you would avoid alerting Tali or any of the other Quarrians of your existence, I'll talk to Tali about you first. She won't like you; that I know. But she trusts me to make the right decisions, and once I explain everything to her, she at least won't say anything too rude to you. And she won't try to shoot you."

"Gee, can't wait to meet the girl. Another person in this galaxy that hates AIs. I'm sure glad we didn't get sucked into a galaxy that was ruled by computersâ€¦ don't worry Shepard. I'm joking." She confirmed her joke to the commander when she remembered the typical perception of her kind's desire to control organics. "Between that and the Illusive Man trying to study me, I feel right at home."

Six snapped his head back at Leliana's awareness of his conversation with the Illusive Man earlier. "Wait, Leliana, you were still in the lab when I spoke with him. How did you know that?"

"The Illusive Man is one paranoid character. He has over a hundred surveillance bugs on this ship. I hacked into them as soon as I noticed them. I was listening to your conversation through a few. I counted nine bugs in this room alone."

"That doesn't surprise me Leliana. The Illusive Man insists on having total control over anything of his. Well, he at least can try. I don't let him influence my decisions on this ship. But Six, I wanted to go over the current mission too, are you ready for â€¦" Before Shepard had time to finish he was interrupted by the door opening, a provocatively dressed woman stepping through.

"Shepard, you don't honestly think we can rely on this man and his toy, do you? He's completely unknown; for all we know, he could be a spy for the Shadow Broker or something worse. Having him on the ship is one thing; trusting our lives with him on the team is foolish." Miranda clearly didn't share the same enthusiasm as some of the other team members.

"I was wondering when the first person to doubt me would show up. We haven't met yet missâ€¦" Six was more entertained than insulted at the accusations. He didn't blame her, but her cold attitude wasn't a pleasant surprise.

"No, we haven't." She stared at the lieutenant, clearly upset with his presence. "I'm Miranda Lawson, Shepard's XO and overseer of the Normandy's mission. I represent the Illusive Man, and he was less-than pleased with your attitude towards him during your meeting, Spartan. Don't expect me to be your friend like the Turian."

"Cut the act, Miranda. You may have justification in your doubts, but the attitude act needs to stop. I trust our newest team members, and I won't be second guessed on my own ship by you. Understand?" Shepard shot a glare at the Cerberus Officer, being answered with a near-emotionless stare from her; one that conveyed her annoyance.

"As I was saying before being interrupted, lieutenant, you haven't known us long, and going onto a Geth planet with possibly heavy

resistanceâ€¦ I wanted to make sure you're up to it. I won't think less of you if you decide you want to observe this mission to get an understanding of how we operate."

"No need to worry, commander. I familiarized myself with the new weapons Jacob provided me, and my armor can interface with your battlefield commands. But that does bring me to something else. If we get to this planet and determine the Geth are present, how quickly can your dropships get us to the combat zone?"

"After the Normandy orbits over the location, it would likely take us 30 minutes to touch down. Why do you ask?"

"Well, Shepard, you may recall me stating that the armor I'm wearing is capable of atmospheric reentry. While I don't have a built-in drag chute, if you have any type of parachutes onboard, my own shields would keep it protected during reentry, and I could then use it to get to the battlefield in less than 5 minutes. The extra 25 minutes may very well prove vital."

"That's ridiculous! You don't honestly believe this, do you Shepard? He's going to get himself killed!" Miranda didn't seem thrilled with Six. Something she was all-too comfortable with stating.

"Then you should be happy, if you think I'm a spy. And I was asking the commander, not you Lawson. What do you say, Shepard?" Six looked towards Shepard for a response.

"I'm not going to try and persuade you otherwise. You seem capable of making your own decisions, and you're right anyways. Getting a 25 minute head-start on the rest of the team could be invaluable. If it comes down to that, you have my support. Just remember you'll be alone before you link up with the Quarians. Head down to the launch bay; one of engineers can get you a drag chute. Do note that they aren't designed to slow a thousand pound super-soldier."

"I wouldn't have it any other way, Shepard. I spent most of my career as a lone infiltrator; it should be just like old times for me. I'll grab my gear from the armory and head down to the shuttle bay. I'll wait at the dropship for your word." He offered a crisp salute to Shepard, receiving one in return. He then walked out the door without a second look at Miranda.

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"Commander, we have reached Haestrom and I have detected a Geth frigate in stationary orbit over the coordinates where Tali is located. It is not transmitting any communication signals, but its shuttle bay is open and appears to be missing a dropship." EDI chimed into the team meeting, confirming Shepard's fears.

"I had a feeling it would be too much to ask for the Geth to have gone without noticing the Quarians. EDI, please inform the lieutenant that he will be dropping as soon as the rest of the team and I load into the Kodiaks. As for everyone else, I have a plan to deal with the Geth in the Quarian compound." Shepard activated the hologram displays on the table, bringing up a map of the soon-to-be battlefield. "We have two clear points of entry, here and here. I'll

take a small team from the first landing zone and we'll move our way into the area and locate Tali. Garrus and Grunt, I want you two with me for this one. Miranda will lead the second fire team and will land at the second landing zone, here. I want you to hold the area in a defensive stance to help draw fire from the Geth. We may also need a second evac point if things get too out of hand. I want everyone to do what they can to save as many Quarian lives as possible." He paused to speak with the ship's helmsman. "Joker, has the Geth frigate done anything since we arrived?"

"Negative commander, it's still stationary in orbit. No comm signals sent or any more dropships have been deployed."

"Good, and one more thing Joker. Can that ship communicate with anything planetside?"

"Don't think so sir. The star's interfering with planet side communications heavily. I doubt it can even reach something in the upper atmosphere."

"Alright, thanks Joker. As soon as the Kodiaks launch, I want you to blast that frigate to hell. It will pick up the dropships instantly on scanners, and we can't afford to have it calling for help. One volley of Javelin torpedoes should do the job."

"Sounds good commander. It'll be fun to test out the weapon systems; I still haven't had a chance to fire these babies. I'll wait for your order, then we'll light that frigate up."

Shepard paused for a few moments, debating with himself if there was anything he could still do. "Everyone head down to the shuttle bay. Remember, switch your weapons to disruptor ammunition. That should give us an edge over those synthetics. Any questions?"

"Are you sure we should be trusting that guy to go in alone? Do you even believe that he can jump safely from the ship?" Jack didn't have any hesitation in speaking her mind about the Normandy's new lone wolf.

"I've already made it clear to Miranda that our new team member is to be treated just like anyone else on this ship, Jack. He wouldn't have offered if the jump was going to kill him. I brought you on the Normandy, and not many people trust you, Jack. Besides, the worst it will do to you is make you have to drag his body back onto the ship. Now would anyone else like to second-guess my judgment?"

Before Jack or Miranda could answer him, Garrus decided it was time to get the mission started. "We all trust you Shepard. Now let's go get Tali off that planet."

Jacob and Garrus saluted Shepard, while everyone else moved out of the briefing room, leaving Shepard a moment to call Six over a private channel for an additional order. "Lieutenant, it's Shepard. You probably heard all that over your armor's radio, right?"

"Yes sir I did. Don't worry, I'm not heartbroken that Miranda or that tattooed basket case don't trust me. I'm glad Garrus tried defending me, even if it didn't change their opinions."

"Good to hear, Six. I have one more thing, something I want only you

to know since you'll be working alone on this one. I want Tali out at all costs. I don't like leaving civilian researchers or friendly military personnel behind, but if you have a chance to safely get her out, you let me deal with her when she gets mad; I know she won't happily leave her friends behind. Understand, Noble Six?"

There was a slight break in his response, but after a moment it came through clear and without more hesitation. "Absolutely, commander. Consider it done. But, with respect, I'm going to rescue as many members of the science team until that happens. I'm sure the Quarian marines would appreciate it. I'm ready to jump whenever you give the order."

"Alright, Six. I'll make my way down to the shuttle bay now. As soon as Joker destroys the enemy frigate and we hover in orbit, you're free to jump." Shepard switched the private channel off and made his way out to the elevator.

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"Commander, the Geth frigate is dust! We're directly over the Quarians' location and you're clear to go." Joker came in over the shuttle's speakers almost as soon as the team felt a slight shockwave resonate through the Normandy. "I had to overcharge the torpedoes, though. I think Garrus should make himself useful and look into weapon upgrades."

"For once, Shepard, I actually am glad Joker can't keep his mouth shut. After the mission I'll get in touch with my old contacts in the Turian military and see what I can do about upgrading the weapons." Garrus smiled at the thought of installing bigger, better guns on a ship that already was as powerful as a cruiser.

"EDI, activate atmospheric barriers on the shuttle bay doors. Six, jump as soon as you can. Good hunting, lieutenant."

Six answered the commander with a green indicator light through his HUD. He turned from the Kodiaks and stood directly in front of the bay doors. A ripple of shields activated in front of him, and then the doors slowly opened. He looked out at the planet before him; the entire planet was a dull beige and brown mix, holding only a small amount of cloud cover and no lakes or oceans he could see from where they were. "Not the prettiest planet, is it Leliana?"

Before she had a chance to answer him, the Spartan carefully jumped from the bay and was quickly pulled down from Haestrom's gravity. He turned himself to face directly at the planet, in the form of a dive. Leaving the atmosphere of the Normandy, all the Spartan could hear now was his calm breathing. The quietness of the drop brought his mind to an old memory, one of another jump from a ship in orbit.

'_I'll find some way to make your sacrifice mean something, Jorgeâ€¦ I promise you that.' _

Before he could begin to think about the rest of the old team, he was violently interrupted by the friction and heat of entering Haestrom's atmosphere. Even with his shields active and the controlled

environment of his armor, he still felt warm. He even broke a sweat.

"Leliana, activate the drag chute as late as you can; I don't want these bastards to have a chance to shoot me down from the sky."

"Of course, lieutenant. May I remind you, you'll still need to activate your armor lock. The drag chute is only going to slow us down and impact without the additional shields will shatter every bone in your body. I think we both would like to avoid that."

He smirked a little, happy to have her company. The heat and smoke from the drop had faded, and he was now falling through a thin cloud layer, barely able to make out the ground that was below him. He zoomed in his visor's vision, and tried to make out any of the coming battlefield. Six only saw a few trails of smoke coming from the ground before he felt an enormous tug at his back.

"Drag chute deployed! Prepare to activate your armor lock Six!" Leliana was yelling in his ear now, eager to ensure he was ready for the less-than safe maneuver they were about to try. "Dammit! The chute didn't slow us down enough, lock your armor now Six or we're dead!"

She didn't need to tell him twice. The near-unbreakable shields wrapped around his body, quickly pulsing and pulling him into a fetal position. A moment later, he felt the violent impact against the top of one of the buildings he was trying to avoid. Before he could curse the drag chute for failing, he came to an abrupt halt on the surface of the planet, creating a small crater around him.

Six struggled for a moment against the pain in his body, cracking several kinks in his back while standing up. "Ughâ€¦let's make sure all the equipment is ready next time we try something like that Leliana. Can you get a reading on the area? I think we landed a little south of where the Quarian team was located. I can barely hear the gunfire." He looked around at the area; no hostiles in sight. This definitely wasn't the right place.

"The star's interference is annoying, but I can give you a map of the area. It looks like the area they were reported to be in is to the north, about 200 meters. We can use those passage ways directly in front of us to get into the next area. I also detect what appear to be element zero signatures all over the area. EDI had told me it's a good way to locate Geth mobile platforms. There are dozens, Six."

"You want me to be challenged, don't you?"

"I also like it when you stay alive, lieutenant. "

Six chuckled a little, loud enough so Leliana would hear in his armor's internal speaker. He took a moment to evaluate the surroundings before moving. He was in a courtyard, Quarian buildings all around him. He noticed everything was stone. If this place was 300 years old at least, they sure knew how to build things to last, even if their materials were a bit outdated. Above the building lines he could see that the star was setting, and decided he didn't want to be fighting at night.

"Alright Leliana let's get going. Keep scanning the area for anything you can find. Hopefully we can find the Quarriansâ€¦ what the?" As Six reached over his shoulder to grab his Mattock, he was surprised that he found nothing there. After reaching for his Incisor and Arc Projector, he turned around and looked at the bottom of the crater he just made. "You have got to be kidding me." There, right in the middle of it, were all three of the weapons he just hoped to find, broken into dozens of pieces.

"It looks like the rough landing managed to destroy those weapons Six." Leliana sounded more surprised than upset, unlike the Spartan.

"You don't say." Six then reached to his lower back and was relieved to find his Eviscerator. He removed it from its magnetic lock and was happy to see the gun fully-functional. Looking down at his leg next, he was again happy to see that his Phalanx was still in one piece. "Well, looks like we're going to be getting close to those Geth. I hope they don't value personal space too much, heh." He activated the disruptor ammunition, and took off through the tunnel in front of him, searching for Tali.

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"Tali, get down!" Reegar screamed in her ear as he threw himself and her into the ground, not waiting for her response. The Geth Destroyer's rocket whizzed by overhead only a moment later, impacting the wall behind them and peppering them with small stone chunks. "Dammit, we have to take that thing out before it gets close, cover me marines!"

The other Quarrians around them all popped out of cover, spraying the destroyer with assault rifle rounds. Only managing to annoy it, they all hoped the squad leader had a plan to deal with it.

Kal sprinted as fast as he ever had to the mining equipment on their left, reaching it just as another rocket flew past him. He dove behind, hoping the Destroyer decided he wasn't the larger threat. Crawling to look around the other side of his rusted cover, he was happy to see the other marines had been able to grab its attention. Using this to his advantage, the red-clad marine sprinted again to a large stone pillar farther behind the Destroyer. Happy to see that it still was making its way to the others, he readied grabbed the rocket launcher off his back and was just about to fireâ€¦

"Kal, you've got two Geth troopers moving in behind you! We can handle the Destroyer, you just keep yourself alive!" Now it was Tali's turn to yell, not hesitating to look out for her friend. She crept over the stone cover she was behind, sending an overload blast into the Destroyer, slowing it down.

Cursing to himself he had to ignore the Destroyer for now, he reequipped his assault rifle just in time to see two Geth troopers come around the corner, immediately firing on him. Firing while he ran, Kal was able to hit them both enough to stagger them, giving him a chance to get behind some new cover to protect him from the new attack angle. Replacing the rifle's thermal clip, he peeked around the side and fired several bursts into the closest platform, watching

its shields drop and several shots create holes in the vital points. Throwing a grenade near it, he was rewarded with the synthetic scream of the platform and the sight of it now in pieces. Laughing to himself, he dropped back behind cover and scanned the area for the other Geth. But he couldn't find it. Just as he was about to throw another grenade towards the mess of the other platform, he caught sight of it directly to his side.

"Oh, Keelahâ€¦!" Before he could bear his rifle at it, pulse rifle fire began to ripple of his shields, tearing at them relentlessly and efficiently. When his shields flickered one more time, he then felt an enormous, sharp pain in his stomach. He leapt over his cover, hoping his shields could recharge before the damn synthetic could make its way around and flank him again. He looked down at his chest, relieved to see only a minor wound. Section seals working perfectly, he sighed in relief he could at least keep fighting.

"Alright you Geth bastard, see how you like this!" Kal leaned over his cover and threw his last grenade in the area of the trooper. The explosion was enough to drop its shields and bring it to the ground, but he could see the flashlight head still on and looking for the rifle that had flown from its hands. Without a second thought, he sprinted over to the Geth, assault rifle in hand, and held the trigger down until its thermal clip was ejected.

Lucky for him, the Geth that had almost killed him was now a twisted mess of circuitry and scrap metal, the light of its optics dark. Smirking over its ruins, he remembered the Destroyer behind him and readied his rocket launcher.

He moved over to a new location to get a clear shot at the platform, catching sight of one of his marines being melted and burned by the Destroyer's flame thrower. Aiming at the fuel tanks on its back, he fired a rocket directly at it, hoping the other marines had already taken its shields down.

The soldier's hopes were quickly ruined, as he saw the rocket explode harmlessly against the kinetic barriers of the Destroyer. Prioritizing that he was now the largest threat, it turned at him and began to make its way to his cover, flamethrower at the ready. Kal only hoped one of the other marines would find his rocket launcher later.

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The first Geth that Noble Six found was a lone trooper, somehow cut off from the main force. He approached it cautiously, still not knowing their capabilities. It didn't appear to have a motion tracker, however, as he was only a few yards from the thing now. Still unknowing to his presence, he decided subtlety was the best choice and activated his energy dagger. Lunging at the Geth, he drove the dagger deep into center mass, bringing the Geth down harshly and quickly. The light that acted as its eye flickered and then went out, indicating he had destroyed it.

"Lieutenant, at the moment you attacked the trooper, I detected its radio activate for a moment. I assume it was able to send a message to the rest of the strike force. Probably means you'll need more than that dagger to deal with them." Leliana stated this to Six as he

readied his shotgun again.

"Great. I almost thought we'd get through to the Quarrians without too much trouble. Can you scan the area for the number of Geth near us?"

"Not here, the confined spaces of the tunnels are interfering with any reliable scans. Maybe if you move out into the clearing I can get something better."

Nodding needlessly, he moved out of the entryway to the tunnel he just went through to a clearing that overlooked a large open area. He looked out on the large valley for a moment before moving around the corner. The whole area looked like it had been developed by the Quarrians in the past. The simple stone architecture was actually appealing to the lieutenant. He was never a fan of the overly dramatic styling of human cities. Rather than be rewarded with thorough scans of the enemy force, he noticed his shields quickly flickering and dropping. Jumping behind some collapsed stone, he was surprised to see his shields stabilize.

"Leliana, what the hell was that? I went out into the sunlight and my shields went crazy."

"Interesting. Let me scan the atmosphere quickâ€¦wow. It appears the instability of the star has effectively destroyed the magnetosphere of the planet. The excess radiation from the star now is what's causing your shields to malfunction. I recommend moving between shaded spots to help minimize the damage. Your armor should keep you more than protected for the time we're here from any radiation or more damage, if you lose all shields."

Being careful of his surroundings, Six began to move in the direction the Cerberus intel deemed the observatory. He figured the Quarrians, or at least Tali and the science team, would be holed up there. Before he got too far though, his motion tracker lit up with multiple red contacts. And since Leliana had set it to register any synthetic as hostile, he had a feeling what was moving towards him.

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The first one he saw immediately opened fire, rifle rounds bouncing against his shields and peppering the stone pillars around him. Diving behind the nearest cover, the synthetics relentlessly fired at his position, creating small clouds of dust all around him with the intense phasic rounds. Using his motion tracker, Six located four enemy platforms moving towards him at an alarming rate.

'_I guess a lack of fear can be a big boost of confidenceâ€¦|' _

Not wanting to see how they intended to welcome him to Haestrom, Six quickly popped up from his cover and targeted the nearest Geth with his shotgun. The standard platform's shields were no match for the Eviscerator, and the buckshot penetrated its chest and staggered it to the ground in a cloud of electricity and circuitry. Snapping his attention to the next Geth, Six fired again and blew the unlucky Geth off the edge of the landing they occupied, sending it plummeting to its demise.

The two other Geth didn't skip a beat, and kept firing at Six as his shields collapsed and he felt the impact of projectiles against his armor. Leaping into new cover, he swapped out his shotgun for the Phalanx, hoping to utilize its stopping power from range. Activating his armor's sprint unit, he ran at 40 mph to a safer distance from the Geth. Not wanting the platforms to catch him, he turned from his cover and opened fire with deadly precision on the enemies gunning straight for him. Watching the first Geth's shields drop, he fired another round directly through its optical unit, dropping it instantly. With the final platform moving in close, he decided to jump at it. Activating his energy dagger, he collided with the Geth harshly and brought them both to the ground. While the trooper was struggling for its rifle, Six dove the dagger deep through its chest, stopping only once his fist created a dent on its chest plate.

Watching the flashlight on its head die out, he stood up, shrugging off the dust of the short struggle. Before he could evaluate the rest of the area, he heard gunfire in the next courtyard, and ran into the next section of tunnels to try and catch it before it was over.

"Leliana, can you give me a map of the tunnels we're in? We need to reach the Quarians now!"

"Already on it, Six." There, that should give us an idea of how to get through this area. The next courtyard is much larger, and I am detecting multiple organic and synthetic masses throughout the area. I suggest we move quickly to avoid any more additional enemies."

Taking off with haste, the Spartan made his way into the next tunnel system, unsurprised when he found them to be without any lighting. Switching his night vision on, Six followed the objective locator Leliana had activated on his HUD.

"Six, I've got multiple enemy contacts on the motion tracker. In these confined spaces they'll tear you to pieces; try hiding in that side passage to your right." Leliana informed Six just as half a dozen Geth troopers began to come around the far corner of the passage, their optics making them easy to spot in the dark. Six quickly leaped to his side, crouching to make himself less visible.

Not expecting the Geth to simply miss him, he readied his shotgun and aimed directly at the intersection he just hid from. As the lights of the Geth drew close, he tensed his finger on the trigger and waited for the first one to spot him.

But they didn't, they simply kept moving to the area he had recently cleared. He even saw that a few of the troopers looked seemingly directly at him, only to keep moving. With their superior numbers, they had no reason to draw him out into a trap. They just missed him.

"Leliana, any ideas why they didn't see me? I would think that some synthetics would have sophisticated enough optical sensors to see me here." Six was genuinely puzzled they walked by.

"While I haven't had any sufficient units to scan, it appears those flashlight heads they have are simple optical units, lacking any thermal or night vision. I assume they cannot see any better than the average human in a dark space like this. That's only a guess Six; maybe your armor just kept you off scans."

"I'll keep those both in mind. But this time they missed us, and we need to get to those Quarrians quickly. We're moving." Six sprang from his hiding spot and darted through the tunnel, eager to avoid the patrol he just missed.

* * *

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At the end of the tunnel he was making his way through, the lieutenant saw that it opened to the outside, instable sunlight pouring through as a beacon. Through the opening he heard gunfire from multiple weapons, some like the pulse rifles he saw the Geth using, and others he didn't recognize. Assuming they were Quarian rifles, he hurried to the end of the tunnel and looked out at the fight before him. Just as he stopped at the entrance, he saw a rocket fly down the middle of the area and impact with a Geth. But it wasn't like the other Geth he had encountered so far. This red monstrosity was towering over the rest, easily 10 feet tall. And since the rocket had exploded harmlessly against its barriers, he guessed it was significantly more powerful. It turned in the direction the rocket came from, locating and prioritizing the lone Quarian that fired at it.

"Six, that Geth is armed with a flamethrower unit and its shield signatures are significantly more powerful than the standard platforms we've encountered so far. The Quarian marine that fired the rocket appears to be injured, and will likely die if attacked. We should probably do something, you know, to save his life!" Leliana added some sarcasm with her last suggestion, prompting the Spartan to spring into action.

Six ran towards the tall Geth, shotgun blazing as he burned through all three shots before the Eviscerator's clip was burned up. Before the Geth could turn and attack him, Six drew his pistol and emptied three rounds into the platform before he reach it, collapsing its shields with the last shot. Seeing the Geth aim its deadly flamethrower, he lunged at it and grabbed the weapon from its hand, landing on the ground on his back.

While he was temporarily victorious, the enemy adapted quickly and planted a strong leg on his chest. Even through his armor and shields, the Spartan felt the air pushed from his lungs as the thousands of pounds of force impacted him violently. Out of reach of either of his weapons, Six activated his energy dagger and swung it across the Geth's leg, staggering it to the ground in a loud and shuddering crash.

Taking his moment of opportunity, he jumped on top of the Destroyer and brought his arm back to deliver the killing blow to the Geth's chest. While his movements and reactions were superhuman, the machine beneath him was no different, offering a quick defense in the form of a mechanical arm around his neck. The machine tightened, keeping him at distance. With another swipe from his dagger, this time removing

the Geth's forearms, he had his clear chance and drove the blade deep through the platform's center, causing electricity to burst forth and metal to boil with the heat of the blade. The emotionless eye looking at him slowly faded, finally going dark as all attempts to resist him died.

Noble Six stood up, panting, just now realizing how tough the Destroyer was to take down.

'_This thing could give some Mgalekgolo a run for their moneyâ€|'

—

Picking up both his shotgun and pistol from the ground, he collapsed the weapons and replaced them on his armor's magnetic locks, now noticing the injured Quarian had made his way to him, rocket launcher still in hand. "Name's Squad Leader Kal'Reegar, Migrant Fleet Marines. What you just did human shouldn't even be possible, but I'm not going to complain about help. You just saved my ass and you have my thanks. An introduction would be nice, though."

"Lieutenant B312, Noble Six. I'm here with Commander Shepard of the Normandy. We're here to find Tali. I hope your team fared well enough to keep her alive this long."

"Maybe you should just ask her yourself, lieutenant? Here she comes." The wounded marine pointed to another Quarian walking towards the Spartan, a much more feminine physique meeting his eyes. In any other situation, Six would have been dead focused on the mission at hand. But her covered beauty was enough to cause the soldier to do a double-take, taking a few moments to snap himself back into combat mode.

"I'm Tali'Zorah vas Neema. I'm the leader of this expedition. Or what's left of itâ€|" Tali looked to her side and saw the remains of one of the Quarian marines, causing her to drop her head in sadness and momentarily ignore the newcomer in front of her.

"Noble Six, at your service, ma'am."

She looked at the Spartan, crossing her arms. "I hope that you don't intend to call me ma'am from now on, Noble Six. Kal does that enough, despite my friendly protests." She looked over at the marine and shot him a sarcastic-looking glare, clearly upset that she was still not referred to as Tali. "If you don't mind telling us, what are you doing here? This mission is supposed to be classified. And we're in Geth space, so I doubt you were just in the neighborhood."

"Actually you could say that Tali. I came here with Shepard, I believe you know each otherâ€| He's on his way down with the whole ground team as we speak. We're here to make sure you get off Haestrom safely. I'm glad I found you nowâ€| it looks like you were having some trouble." He looked around at the mess of dead Quarrians and Geth platforms, indicators of the intense firefight that had been taking place as Six arrived.

"Shepard, he's here? Keelah, how did youâ€|whatâ€|it doesn't matter. I am still on a mission for the Admiralty Board. I have to secure the data we have gathered before I'm going anywhere. And I'm not leaving anyone behind, even for Shepard." She looked at Kal and nodded.

"The commander told me you'd be difficult. My orders are to make sure you get out alive, Tali. The data doesn't matter to me."

"Well if Shepard told you anything about me, then you probably know I can be stubborn about my duties to my people, and that I won't comply with you if my friends are in danger. So you can try and take me away from here, or you can do something important and help me retrieve the data we collected. You look like a soldier thatâ€¦waitâ€¦you don't look like any soldier in the Alliance I've ever met. What are you, Noble Six?"

"It's a long story, Tali. Tell you what; I'll help you with that data if you let me get you out of here alive. When we're on the Normandy, I'll answer all the questions you have about me. Sound fair?"

She looked at the Spartan, contemplating the offer he just made. While it was obviously to her benefit, Tali still didn't like that her new savior didn't mention her friends and team. "You help get my team back to our ship, and you've got a deal. Also, am I just supposed to call you Noble Six? What's your name?"

"Well, my name is SPARTAN-B312 if you're up for that. I'm a lieutenant if you're feeling formal. But Six should work just fine. And fine, I'll help you with your team, but you sure as hell better keep your head down. I _am_ here for you, remember."

"You're just forgetting one thing, lieutenant. I'm not just going to sit by while you rescue the rest of our team. I was sworn to protect Tali'Zorah and the science team. Tali may be safe, but the other researchers are still in the science complex in the next courtyard. I'm not going to let you go after them while I just get on the ship." Kal was still clutching his stomach, but his voice made it clear he had no intention of quitting.

"You're not in any shape to fight, Reegar. I like your determination, but I don't want you just to be a bullet magnet while we do the rest. You stay here, and Tali and I can focus without worrying about you." Six said it politely but determined; he had no intentions of letting this Quarian die a hero. "Besides, you need to stay here with the wounded marines. You can at least still fire; the rest of your team here looks pretty rough."

Tali and Reegar both looked behind them and saw that two of the other marines were still alive; barely. Tali rushed over to them and started looking them over, finding more wounds and active suit seals than any healthy Quarian should have. She quickly activated her medi-gel, sealing several of the wounds in a gooey mess. It may have been sticky, but it was sure better than dying.

"He's right, Kal. We need someone to stay and keep these two alive. You can also guard this entrance into the science courtyard so we don't get attacked from behind. I know the Geth aren't finished and we don't need to be looking over our shoulder for more platforms. Besides, you aren't in any shape to keep up with us, and you know it." Tali reached to the ground and picked up one of the wounded marine's sidearm, handing it to Reegar. "Just in case they get too close for rockets. We'll get the other researchers to safety, and they can pick you up with the ship after. Stay safe, Kal."

Tali turned to her new companion and nodded she was ready. They

turned from the other Quarrians and made their way through the doorway behind them, on their way to the science wing of the compound. Along the way, they found a few more Quarrian marines—or what was left of them.

"The Geth are relentless! We're going to kill every last one of these bosh'tets before we leave, Noble Six." Tali kneeled down to look closely at one of the dead marines, slumped against the wall of the tunnel they were in. "His name was San, he was a good friend of Kal." She looked a bit further in the tunnel and saw several Geth were destroyed. "At least he took a few with him. Come on, the science wing is just around the next tunnel."

They increased their speed and turned around the corner, sunlight indirectly coming through. It had set enough that the courtyard they were in now protected them from any direct sunlight, negating the need to move from cover to cover to protect their shields. Looking out from the doorway, they saw at least a dozen platforms, maybe more. But one in the middle of the group caught Tali's attention quickly. "That tall white one is a Geth Prime; it has extremely strong shields and additional armor, and it's armed with a heavy machine gun. Be careful when we attack it, Six."

"Thanks for the info. You know, everyone I've met here has been pretty quick to accept my help. Why no doubts?" He turned to the Quarrian at his side, signaling her to stop before they entered the courtyard. Tali turned to him, taking only a moment to think of an answer for him.

"Don't you know anything about Geth? They don't work with organics, ever. Being a human here is enough for me to trust you. And if that isn't enough for you, you're with Shepard. He's one of the only real friends I have in this damn galaxy, and if he trusts you enough to send you after me alone, then I can too. Now that I think of it, how did you get here alone, ahead of the rest of the team?"

"Tali, if I just told you how I did, you wouldn't believe me for one second. I'll just have to show you the video feed from my HUD. You can tell me if you think it's real or not." Six raised his arm when he finished speaking, activating his blue TACPAD and scrolling through to find the video clip from earlier. He held his arm out, a small hologram projecting for Tali to see. Noticing the seemingly puzzled body language of Tali, he added an extra thought. "It's a called a TACPAD Tali; it isn't too different from the omni-tools everyone here seems to have. This is synced with my armor, though, and gives me battlefield data. But like I said, I can tell you more about me on the Normandy."

'_Everyone here? Where is he from?' Tali thought to herself as Six finished his sentence. _

The feed came in clear, showing Six looking at the Kodiak shuttles in the Normandy's cargo bay. He turned from the shuttles, and walked to the hanger doors, shields flickering to life and the doors opening to reveal Haestrom below. While she didn't show any visible emotions, Tali was in awe of the beauty of the planet below, remembering she had been sleeping on her way down to Haestrom when her team arrived. She was immediately upset she hadn't been awake to see the sight with her own eyes.

Her trance was abruptly ended when something impossible happened; Six jumped right out the shuttle bay doors! The only reason she didn't gasp any louder was that the lieutenant was standing, alive, right next to her. She watched as he plummeted towards Haestrom, first gliding through the emptiness of space, and then the heat and smoke of reentry. As the video came through the cloud cover, she could see the buildings of the complex they were now in, and watched as Six slowed only slightly, and activated some weird shields she had never seen. The video was dark for a moment, blocked out by the debris and dust of Six's impact. And to her amazement, he simply stood up with only a few grunts and began to look around at his new surroundings.

"How did youâ€¦ that was... whoâ€¦ _what_ are you?" She almost considered yelling at him for making a joke at such a time, but she could see through his posture and calmness that he showed her how he really got there. For some reason she couldn't explain to herself, she believed what she just saw. Something about this new soldier told her to trust him.

"That's going to be a long talk, Tali. Like I said, when we get back on the Normandy, I can tell you everything. But right now we need to rescue the rest of your team. Shepard and the rest of the ground team should be arriving soonâ€¦" Before he could finish, he was interrupted by his radio, by none other than the man himself.

"Noble Six, this is Shepard. You alright down there? We're under a minute out; we're landing on the far side of the observatory and we're going to make our way through the Geth to it. Do you have confirmation that Tali is alive?"

Six looked at Tali and chuckled to himself before answering. "Maybe you should just ask her yourself, commander."

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Author's Note:

Well, Tali and Six have met finally. Hope everyone was satisfied with the chapter. The next one will probably finish Haestrom, and the rest will be dialogue between Tali and Six on the Normandy, and possibly Garrus will join. I also intend to bring Six's remorse and troubles detailing Noble's deaths during the end of the next chapter or at the latest two from now. We'll just have to see; but I haven't forgotten about it, don't worry. I just wanted to get Tali on the team first.

PS - WOLF - I don't have a Deviantart account, sorry. Just keep mentioning things in reviews, I read all of them so don't worry about them getting to me. Thanks for all the help so far!

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Revisions:

Just did a few revisions. If I messed something up, please let me

know.

Thanks

6. Escape

"Tali, is that you? Gosh, it's good to hear your voice." Shepard was more than relieved to hear that Tali was alive and well. Clearly, this Spartan on his team was already paying dividendsâ€|

"I'm glad you're here Shepard; you can tell me later how you found out about Haestrom. Your friend already helped us out a great deal, Shepard. He killed a Destroyer by himself! I don't know where you found him, but you don't have to ask me if I'm glad he's here." She looked at the Spartan while speaking to Shepard, causing Six to simply shrug at Tali playfully. "Shepard, Noble Six and I are going to the science wing to recover the data cache and rescue the other researchers from the Geth. Whatever you can do to help would be appreciated. Once we have the data, we're going to get the other survivors onto our ship and they can leave safely. I'll be joining you we're done."

"It doesn't sound like you plan on going with the rest of your team." Shepard was clearly surprised at what Tali had just told him. "So let me get this straight Noble Six. Not only did you beat us to rescuing Tali, you also recruited her already? Sounds like you might be doing my job for me lieutenant." He laughed a little over the radio, clearly amused at Six.

"Just doing what I can, commander. We have wounded at our location; I would suggest letting the Quarians dock with the Normandy before leaving the system. Doctor Chakwas should be able to help a lot with them."

"Good idea, Six. It's fine with me, as long as Tali doesn't mind dealing with a Cerberus outfit?"

"You and Doctor Chakwas aren't Cerberus, Shepard. I don't have any problems with you. And we don't have the medical equipment to help everyone here. The med bay on the Normandy should be able to stabilize the wounded long enough to get back to the Fleet for a full medical exam. I would work with Cerberus if it meant keeping my team alive, if only for a little while. We'll get moving into the science area before more Geth reach us. The marine leader, Kal'Reegar, is going to stay behind and cover us. So don't shoot a wounded marine with a rocket launcher. Get him out alive if you come across him on your way to us Shepard."

"I'll make sure we do Tali. We're just about to land. Make sure to keep in radio contact. And Six: make sure you keep her safe. She's in your hands now, lieutenant."

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"Shepard, I have scanned the ruins, but I am unable to give an accurate number on the Geth in the area. However, I have detected only one dropship. It is unlikely that you will encounter more than a

full platoon. That being said, it is a Geth planet, and they may be numerous. I suggest moving carefully to engage them in small numbers." EDI may not be loved by the entire crew, but she had proven her value already.

"Thanks EDI. We'll try to do that. Could you get a layout of the area for us?"

"Only partially, but I was able to determine the best course for you to move towards Noble Six and Tali's location. There is also an atmospheric anomaly that you will need to take into consideration. The instability of Dholen has deteriorated the magnetosphere of Haestrom, and this will cause direct sunlight to damage your shields. I suggest moving through cover to minimize damage."

As EDI finished speaking, the Kodiak took off and left Shepard, Garrus, and Grunt in a corner, with a view of the canyon in front of them and a clear path, now marked by EDI to lead them to Noble Six and Tali. Shepard waved them forward, and they began to move down a large ramp overlooking the area.

"The sun is really messing with my shields Shepard. EDI wasn't joking. At least we get to fight in the shadeâ€¦" Garrus' sarcasm was clear, and Shepard laughed a little while Grunt simply huffed. "Look up ahead, looks like a control house for that gate. Let's check it out."

The three made their way off the ramp and went through the stone doorway, finding a destroyed Geth destroyer and a dead Quarian on the floor. Both looked like they had taken some heavy damageâ€¦ dark red blood and white synthetic fluid laid in pools all over the floor. Next to the gate controls, a holo-journal was sputtering to activate, finally coming in over a large amount of static and other unpleasant noises.

"The Geth are on Haestrom! They've landed on the platform behind us. I'm staying to buy the others time to escapeâ€¦ If anyone finds this message, find Tali'Zorah; she and her data are all that matters here! Find her and get her offâ€¦" The audio file was cut short, the sound of phasic rounds impacting the stone and then metal.

"We need to keep moving; Garrus, get the gate open and let's go. We know Tali is safe, but we need to save as many of the Quarians as we can. Grunt, I want you on point."

The Korgan pounded his fists together quickly and loudly, forming a toothy smile in response to Shepard's order. "Gladly, Shepard. Let's show these mechanical beasts what happens when you mess with the galaxy's best." He huffed when looking at Garrus. Clearly, only he and Shepard counted as the best.

Garrus fiddled for a few moments at the controls, and was pleasantly rewarded with the rust-colored gate dropping into the ground. The three moved out of the gatehouse and turned the corner to see the next area now accessible to them. Scanning the area for hostiles, they were suddenly disheartened to see an object flying towards them very fast.

"Dropship, every get to cover!" Shepard was yelling as all three were already diving behind some stone pillars that had been left behind by

the Quarrians 300 hundred years ago. Just as they reached the stone pillars, half a dozen Geth platforms slammed into the ground with clouds of dust and debris as the dropship whizzed by overhead. Through the clouds, they could see the ominous lights of the Geths' heads come to life and look straight at them.

Pulse rounds flew around their cover, creating their distinct laser-like sound. The first Geth was foolish enough to come charging at them, only to be greeted by a Claymore shotgun blast from a few feet away.

"Hah! These machines will know the meaning of fear before this day is done!" Grunt leapt up and charged another platform that had foolishly separated itself from the others, pinning it to the ground and smashing it to pieces with his massive body. Before he could charge the others, his armor pinged with metallic rounds ricocheting off.

"Dammit Grunt, get back to cover!" Shepard screamed at him as he emptied an entire thermal clip into the closest Geth, shattering its shields and severing an arm. Before it had a chance to regain its composure, Garrus put a sniper round through its head, dropping it to the ground. "Thanks Garrus. "

Garrus smirked as Shepard spoke, taking aim at the next platform and dropping it in similar fashion. Before his ego could form a string of cocky words, he was brought back to his level with the rough feeling of a shotgun blast hitting his barriers. "Damn, that hurts. Shepard, I could use some help over here." He looked over to his right and saw a Geth moving to their position, shotgun at the ready. Shepard took aim with his assault rifle, and fired several bursts into its chest, dropping its shields and peppering it with several holes. As it dropped to the ground, it managed to fire one more round at Garrus, dropping his own shields and puncturing his armor.

"Garrus, you okay?" Shepard looked down, the danger over for now. He saw the blood trickle from the Turian's armor, but only in a very small amount.

"Ughâ€¦ I'll be fine, it just hurts like hell. It only was my shoulder. I can make it through the mission without a problem. A little medi-gel and a few drinks later should be just fine Shep, heh." Garrus was clenching his teeth as he spoke, but to his credit he stood up and readied his sniper rifle without hesitationâ€¦ and only a minor grunt and curse.

The three looked around and saw that the Geth were beatenâ€¦ momentarily. Before they had a chance to regain their breaths, Garrus noticed with the zoom of his visor that more platforms were moving on the far end of the opening they were in. "Oh crapâ€¦ more Geth, coming in from the other side! We should try and get above them, pick them apart and make them move through sunlight to reach us."

"Then we shall fight in the shadeâ€¦ but no hiding Turian! I want to see the sparks from when we shoot them!" Grunt piped in as he already started jogging to the stairs to the second level balcony.

"We better catch Grunt before he gets himself killedâ€¦" Shepard spoke as he and Garrus jogged to keep up with the antsy Krogan, shooting at the Geth to help draw some attention from him. Shepard

pelted platforms with his assault rifle, downing their shields for Garrus to pick off with his sniper rifle. It worked with several platforms, but they seemed to be making little progress on their enemies' numbers.

Moving up the balcony, the trio took cover behind some stacked crates, providing protection from both the star and the Geth. It was none too soon, as a rocket blew past them and impacted the end of the balcony, destroying the guard wall and pelting them with chunks of metal and rock.

"Dammit, keep your heads down. We don't need any heroes this early in the day!" Shepard was barking orders as he unloaded a full clip blind-firing from his cover, to keep the Geth from storming their position. "As soon as it fires another rocket, Grunt and I will provide cover fire; Garrus, I want you to put a bullet through its damned flashlight head. Remember, the red ones have the rockets."

Garrus simply laughed at Shepard, despite the inappropriate timing. "Shepard, you don't need to remind me what kind of Geth I need to look for. I spent just as much time as you killing these things. And don't worry; it'll be dead before it hits the groundâ€¦ Ready when you are."

Shepard nodded at Garrus, and then turned to Grunt and raised his hand with three fingers extended. Silently counting down, the two leapt from their cover and held the triggers on their rifles, aiming at the red Geth that was getting too close for comfort. They were less-than thrilled to see that its shields didn't collapse with the rewarding sound of circuits overloading, and ducked behind their cover once more.

"Garrus, take that thing out now!" Shepard was scrambling to load a new thermal clip, trying to at least stall the Geth before it got so close a rocket blast would turn them all to paste.

Garrus knew what to do. He didn't hesitate for a moment, spinning around his cover, sniper rifle at the ready. He stood strong as the cold, emotionless eye of death stared back at him. He pulled the trigger, sending a bullet into the Geth, shattering its shields as it continued into the head of the platform. A rocket fired from the Geth's hands at the same moment, speeding by Garrus' head only a few feet away, impacting far behind him.

If he had even been a split second slower, all three of them would be dead.

He didn't even have time to savor his victory, as multiple troopers came up the opposing ramp and began to pepper him with pulse rounds, carving through his shields as though they didn't have full power.

Diving back into cover, Shepard and Grunt managed to keep them from advancing by firing wildly into their group. While the others were firing at the Geth with their assault rifles, Garrus took the opportunity and used them as a distraction. Peeking around his wall, he fired off two quick shots from his rifle, severing the head of one Geth and punching a hole through another's chest. Both platforms dropped to the ground, cutting their numbers.

"Shepard, give me another distraction like that and I can drop a few more!" Garrus yelled over the noise of multiple rifles, snapping his head back as a few rounds impacting the stone near his face.

"Negative Garrus, we're going through thermal clips too fast. Hold on a moment." He tapped Grunt on the shoulder then to grab his attention, making sure he was ready to listen to his plan. "Grunt, I want you to run right at them with your shotgun ready. Be careful and use cover as much as possible, but draw their fire without burning through ammunition. Garrus and I will both use our rifles to drop them while they focus on you. Clear?"

Grunt only smiled in response, not even looking at the commander or Garrus. He locked his assault rifle on his back, drawing his Claymore Heavy Shotgun to replace it. He pumped it, and raised it in readiness.

Shepard turned to Garrus next, checking to see the Turian was ready. "Ready when you are, Shepard. Let's remind these Geth what happened last time they pissed us off." Garrus smirked at the thought, remembering all those Geth he had sent straight to Hell during the hunt for Saren.

Shepard raised a hand, three fingers extended as he counted down. "On my go— three— two— one— go!" Grunt sprinted forward, drawing fire from multiple Geth platforms in a perfectly executed maneuver, not even groaning from the impact of multiple phasic rounds.

With the Geth foolishly focusing on the lone Krogan, Shepard and Garrus both snapped from around cover and aimed their sniper rifles at the preoccupied targets. They each fired in quick succession, Shepard dropping three as Garrus eclipsed him with five kills. The final two platforms managed to evade them, turning to run back down the ramp they came from.

Sadly for them, they had failed to drop the oversized Krogan still charging them, and were both quickly decorated with holes in their bodies as the Claymore fired off two rounds, shaking the ground around it.

"Hah! Run away you cowards! Is there no one worthy of fighting us on this rock?" Grunt was laughing, even with several bullet wounds in his arms and scratches all over his armor. "These vermin run from us because they know they cannot win!"

Shepard and Garrus simply laughed at the Krogan, happy that they had won the battle— for now. "Shepard to team two, do you copy?"

A calm and distant voice answered him over the radio. "Commander, Miranda. We've landed at the secondary LZ and have secured it from a small squad of Geth troopers. It's been quiet ever since we landed; I don't think they are paying any attention to us. Is everything all clear at your location?"

"It is, Miranda. We've neutralized a few squads of Geth troopers and a heavy rocket trooper. Things are quiet now; we're going to keep making our way into the complex and link up with Noble Six and Tali. You keep your team alert and ready if we need reinforcements."

"Copy that commander. We'll stay here until you need us."

"You know, she doesn't sound so unpleasant when she just talks on the radio." Garrus chimed in a snappy remark, something he was almost expected to do by now.

"Very funny Garrus. She may be a pain, but she knows how to get the job done right." Shepard turned back towards his two companions, happy with the progress they had already made. "Alright, we've made it this far without much trouble. Let's keep moving, and locate some of the Quarrians that Six and Tali mentioned. Keep your eyes open for wounded. But our main objective is still to link up with Tali and Six. Let's go."

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"I'll make sure we do Tali. We're just about to land. Make sure to keep in radio contact. And Six: make sure you keep her safe. She's in your hands now, lieutenant."

Shepard's voice cut from the radio, and Six was once again left alone with his new Quarian companion. "Alright Tali, you're the one that knows more about these things. Give me a plan." Six peeked over the ledge the two were standing on, scanning the courtyard below. He saw several Geth troopers, a red platform that appeared to be armed with some kind of rocket launcher, another red Geth, but taller and armed with something he couldn't make out. And then the big one; the Prime. Six had fought Hunters before, but this thing didn't have a big orange weak spot on its back. It could be trouble.

Tali seemed a little surprised that he was so quick to ask for her advice, but was not hesitant to give it. "The Geth Prime is the most dangerous one by far. We need to keep away from its line of fire, or we'll be in trouble. The troopers shouldn't be much trouble, they are standard platforms with no special weapons. The small red one has a rocket launcher, so don't stand in front of any walls. And the tall red one is a Destroyer like the one you killed earlier. But this one doesn't seem to have a flamethrower, just a heavy machine gun. If you can bring its shields down, I can hack its systems and turn its IFF off for a short time. Hopefully enough for it to scrap a few of those troopers."

Six looked back at the group of Geth, scanning the area around them and their cover. At the far end of the courtyard, he saw a lone platform that looked like it was hacking into the door it was standing by. "Tali, that Geth at the far end; what's it doing?"

She peeked over the ledge, taking only a moment to realize what it was doing. "It must be trying to hack into the science wing. Six, none of the marines were in this area when the attack hit. If the Geth get in before we can helpâ€¦"

"You don't need to tell me Tali. We'll get them _all_ out safely. I promise you that."

Six couldn't see much of Tali's face behind her purple visor, but he was positive that he saw the outline of a smile on her barely-visible

cheeks. "Thank you, Six. It means a lot to have someone that doesn't even know me risk his life. And for some Quarriansâ€¦ Not many people would give a Quarian a second look. But you're going to risk everything for me and my friends. Thank you." She nodded at him while she paused for a moment. "I'm going to check my shotgun and pistol, then I'll wait for your signal."

Six grabbed his own Eviscerator in response, popping a new thermal clip into the heat sink in preparation for the coming fight. As he was checking the grenades he had from the Normandy's armory, he began to think about what he was doing.

"_I really am going out of my way to help this girl. But I've just met her. What could make me do something soâ€¦?"_

"I believe you're looking for redemption, lieutenant."

Six turned around at the sound of a familiar voice, sure of its origin, but not willing to believe it. Right in front of Six was someone that he hadn't seen in five years. And with good reason.

"Kat! But howâ€¦!?"

"You just got transported into another galaxy, lieutenant; do you really need to question how I'm here?"

The Spartan tried to shake it off, but he opened his eyes again, still looking right at the other Spartan, fully clad in her cyan armor, minus the helmet she held at her side. Six noticed the needle-round hole in the visor, but Kat's perfect face said otherwise.

Six was baffled; worried he might be losing it. "Butâ€¦ What are you doing? Why now? It's been five years, Katâ€¦!"

"Time doesn't matter much for me, lieutenant. And I'm here for you. I know why you're doing this, and I'm glad you have something to fight for again. But you don't need to redeem yourself from something that you didn't do. And don't act like you don't know what I mean."

He bit his tongue for a moment as he thought of a response. "It's not that easy for me, Kat. I can't justâ€¦!"

"You can and you need to, Six. Stop thinking about what's happened, and worry about yourself for once. But right now, you've got a girl you need to help." Kat turned slightly, looking over her shoulder to say one last thing. "And get to know her, Spartanâ€¦!"

"Get to know her? What are you talking aboutâ€¦?" Before he got a response, Kat smiled at him and faded from his vision.

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"Six, are you ready to go? We can't wait forever." Tali's voice shook the Spartan back into reality, causing him to shake his head quickly, as if he could shake himself back to normal.

"Yea, I'm ready. Stay close and behind me; let me take the damage."

Tali wasn't happy about his command, but she realized he was right. He was clad in armor that was more advanced than anything she had ever seen, and she already knew some of combat abilities. They wereâ€ better than hers, to say the least. "Ok, lieutenant. I'm right behind you. Remember, I can hack any Geth whose shields you take down."

"Thanks, Tali. Let's move."

Six and Tali moved slowly down from the ledge, being careful to remain hidden behind cover while they closed in on the unaware Geth. They both readied their shotguns, Six with his Eviscerator and Tali with her Scimitar, Six quickly peeking around from the cover they were behind. Two Geth troopers, and the rocket trooper, were standing close by while the other Geth had moved up by the door the researchers were behind. The Spartan switched his external audio off, giving him a chance to speak to Tali quickly before they attacked.

"Ok, I'm going to hit the rocket trooper. You hack it immediately after; hopefully it will attack the other two and the rocket will destroy them all, heh. Wait for my go."

Tali acknowledged him with a sharp nod, raising the Scimitar in her hands. Six raised his hand and counted off to three. As soon as he clenched his fist, the Spartan spun around the wall with superhuman speed, diving and rolling towards the rocket trooper in a blur. He was already on his feet and pulling the trigger before any of the Geth even had noticed him.

The serrated metal ammunition of the shotgun blasted the red platform, causing it to stagger back, and its shields to crack out with an electronic hiss. The other two troopers, now aware of the Spartan, turned towards him and immediately raised their rifles and fired. It took him long enough to get to cover that they actually managed to drop his shields, mass effect rounds pinging off his armor.

'_Damn, those rifles really tear through shields. I need to be careful around these Gethâ€'_ _He thought to himself as he saw Tali extending her arm, the now-familiar orange glow of an omni-tool wrap her forearm. To his amazement, he heard the Geth behind the wall scream a terrible, mechanical sound before a large explosion rocked the area and sent debris and rubble flying over his head.

Noble Six peered around the corner and saw the remains of three Geth, one completely blown to pieces, the other two severely damaged and sparking on the ground.

"Nicely done, Miss vas Normandy. Is that the right way to say it?"

"Well it's actuallyâ€ get down!" Tali dove into the cover the Spartan was just using as a flurry of machine gun fire buzzed over her head, peppering the stone walls and pillars behind her. Six didn't even look behind him to analyze the new threat before he ducked his head back down, too.

"Thanks for the heads up. What was behind me?"

"The other Geth by the door heard us; the other troopers and the Destroyer are making their way towards us. The Prime looked like it was staying, though. It probably wants to keep the hacker protected from us. The destroyer can't get close, Six. The heavy machine gun will tear us apart."

"Alright, Tali. You deal with those troopers, and I'll take care of the Destroyer."

Before even had a chance to answer him, the lieutenant sprinted from their cover, drawing the fire of all the Geth that were moving towards them. Tali capitalized on the opportunity and sent a familiar combat drone out from her omni-tool.

"Go get 'em Chiktikka, good girl!" Tali watched as the purple drone sped towards the mechanical foes, waiting for it to strike before she fired.

As soon as the drone reached the first trooper, it attacked with a quick electrical charge that managed to stun the Geth, and more importantly, to drop its shields. Tali took the chance and fired straight at the Geth, her shotgun carving a small hole through its side and dropping it to the ground.

Sadly for the Quarian, the two remaining troopers were more prepared for the done, and they quickly dispatched it. Chiktikka quickly flickered out, and they now focused solely on the lone Quarian after the grey-armored soldier had already sprinted past them. Both raised their rifles and began to fire relentlessly at her, several rounds impacting her shields and causing her suit's warning alarms to set off. Tali cursed them in her native language, ducking back behind her cover as she tossed a grenade around the wall to stall the Geth. While she knew it wouldn't destroy them, she was happy to hear the troopers scream in surprise and annoyance.

'_Hah! That'll teach those bastards to pick a fight with a Quarian.'_

Her shields still low, Tali decided that science should be given a chance to triumph over might this time. She activated her omni-tool, and she spun her wrist around the wall of her cover. Her blind aim was flawless, and she was happy to see her shield meter recharge, and even go over the normal limit.

'_Let's see how tough you are without your shields, Bosh'Tet!'

—

With her added shield boost, the Quarian leaned around the cover she was behind and pumped out three shots from her gun in quick succession, dropping the Geth whose shields she had just repurposed, and damaging the second. The damaged Geth realized it was now alone, and immediately charged Tali, rifle blazing away. She ducked her head back behind the stone, large chunks being whittled off by the rifle's constant fire. Tali dropped her shotgun and readied her pistol, charging around the corner and quickly fired off as many rounds as she could.

The first few shots pinged off the Geth's shields, then at next several impacted the platform, causing metal to warp and sparks to fly. She pulled the trigger once more and sent a mass effect round right into the synthetic's head, the optical light flickering off in an instant. She watched, with a bit of sadistic pleasure and also relief, as it dropped to the ground, destroyed.

The Quarian was not without her own scars, however. The rapid-fire pulse rifle had stripped her of her shields, with a round managing to puncture her arm. She looked towards the area of pain and saw a small amount of red blood running down her arm, dripping on the dusty stone beneath her feet. She barely caused a spill on the ground before her suit sealed the wound and administered a liberal dose of antibiotics. She felt a slight dizziness as they made their way through her system, though she was happy to have any feeling after a suit puncture.

Her momentary bliss was rudely interrupted by the synthetic screams of one Geth Destroyer; one that she had carelessly forgotten about. She turned around and saw the large platform trying desperately to keep up with the inhumane speed of Noble Six's movements, firing wildly as he moved from cover-to-cover to close the gap between the two.

"Come on, you big ugly bitch! Show me what you can do!" The confident soldier let out an insult very un-Spartan like. But the lieutenant was not ordinary Spartan. The Spartan drew his shotgun, pumped a new clip into the chamber, and spun around the final piece of cover between him and the red Destroyer. He charged the Geth, catching it slightly surprised as he fired off the three-round shot capacity of his Eviscerator as quickly as the gun allowed. The final shot was enough to drop the Geth's shields, but it did nothing to puncture the armor of it. Reacting on instinct, Six dove at the Destroyer and brought his right arm back, ready to strike it. Colliding with the large enemy was less than comfortable, as they were both violently shaken and dropped to the ground. The crash reminded the Spartan of his time fighting Hunters on Reach.

While the Destroyer foolishly clawed for its weapon, Noble Six activated his energy dagger with a pulse of white light, hot plasma flakes dripping from the blade's generator. He dove the dagger deep into the Geth's chest, melting metal and circuitry with ease. He tugged his arm to the side, creating a satisfying hole across the middle of it. The Geth, however, wasn't finished, and it finally decided reaching for its rifle wasn't the logical response to an enemy currently pinning it on the ground. The mechanical menace struck back at the Spartan with its arms, hitting him square in the chest with all its synthetic might. Even a fully-armored Spartan has his limits, and the force was enough to knock him off the Geth and momentarily stagger him.

Six watched as the Geth stood up before him, and charged right at him, without even reaching for its rifle. Luckily for the Spartan, the Geth had overlooked the still-shimmering energy dagger on his arm, and Six used his chance to swipe at the charging enemy. He threw his arm through the air with precision, cleanly severing a leg from the platform. Six now watched with glee as the monstrous Destroyer collapsed at his feet, grunting in its annoying, synthetic voice. He raised his arm one last time, driving it through the Geth's head and into the stone ground, boiling the sand and stone into glass with the

intense heat of the blade. He stared down at the Geth, happy to see the light on its head die out, and the body stopped struggling. Six saw from his side that Tali was walking towards him, and he was pretty sure that, under her mask, she had a look of amazement on her face.

"That was incredible, Six! How can you do something like that?" She wasn't even looking at him as she spoke, but stared awestruck at the large Geth that had been cut to pieces before her eyes, by a single human. "Actually, you can tell me about it on the Normandy. We still have that Prime to deal with; we're lucky it hasn't decided to attack us yet. But we have to get to the researchers Six, before those two remaining Geth get into the complex."

"You're right, Tali. If those Geth get access to the science wing, your friends will be in big trouble. I'm not going to watch as some machines massacre unarmed civilians. But stay down this time, Shepard would have my head if you got hurt while attacking that Prime—| wait—| what happened to your arm?"

Tali had almost forgotten about the wound, the suit's built in pain killers had almost dulled the pain completely. "Oh this—|? It's nothing too serious, just a small wound; it's on my arm. My suit already sealed the wound to keep contamination to a minimum. I'll have to look at it on the Normandy, but I'll be fine now. Don't worry about me; I'm not the one that just got thrown by a Destroyer. Are you ok?"

Six was about to dismiss Tali's question when he coughed from the Geth's recent attack, splattering a small amount of blood across the inside of his visor.

'_Well it was strong enough to send me flying for a moment—|'_

Not feeling comfortable removing his armor, he decided to simply deal with the problem for now, and left his helmet on. "I'm ok, but thanks for asking. I've gone through a lot worse before and made it out in one piece. But for you sake, stay behind cover for this one. I have a plan to deal with the Prime and remaining trooper, but I need to do it alone. Shepard sent me here to get you out safely, and that Prime isn't going to help us out."

Tali made a slight movement with her hand to object, before catching herself and stopping the words forming in her mouth. She wanted to argue with Six; to say he needed her help. But even though she had just met him, Tali could already tell that he knew how to take care of himself. And a Geth Prime was something even she was cautious around. She didn't like the idea of sitting out a fight, but Tali could tell it was important to Noble Six. "Alright, Noble Six. I'll stay behind cover while you deal with the Prime. But if I see you in any trouble, I'm coming to help."

"Fine Tali. But I'm not going to let it come to that. Keep any eye out for any Geth reinforcements, and I'll take care of the Prime before you can even get anxious."

Before Tali could begin to respond, the Spartan took off in a blur, barely giving her time to peek around her cover to see what he was doing.

The Prime was standing vigilant at the doorway, protecting the lone trooper that was attempting to hack the panel. It was standing in the open, both a weakness and problem for Noble Six. If he attacked from cover, he could easily pick the two platforms apart. That would be time-consuming. But if he decided to attack head-on, it could turn into a bloody mess. Tali hoped that Noble Six understood the situationâ€¦

While Tali was still looking the area over, her thoughts were interrupted by the mechanical screams of the Geth Prime. Snapping her attention to it, she saw a faint blur climbing atop the back of the Geth, and a short dagger instantly appearing in the air above its neck. Tali had never seen anything like it; the blade was a blue and white shimmer, with small droplets falling from it. As she was still admiring it, the blade suddenly drove deep into the Geth, instantly protruding from the front of the its neck. With a few more screams the Geth suddenly was without a head, the body falling to the ground with a loud crash.

The trooper hacking the doorway barely had time to turn around in response before a shotgun blast threw it into the stone wall behind it, severing its body in half. The faint shimmer Tali had seen then stopped moving, rippling with distorted light for a moment before her new found ally appeared seemingly from thin air.

"How do you have active camouflage? The Geth developed that alone, after the war!" Tali was almost speechless at the sight before her. Not only had Noble Six destroyed a Prime in an instant, he did it without a gun.

Six chuckled a little at her continued interest in him. "Tali, you keep asking these questions, but like I said, we can talk about it later. Don't you want to check on your team stuck behind this door?"

Breaking herself from her momentary bliss, Tali sprinted towards the doorway and entered the necessary codes to open the science wing. She held her breath as the door slowly opened.

It was unnecessary.

Before her stood the entire science team; all unharmed by the Geth. Except for a few that appeared to need a change of suits. While more trembled and expected a storm of Geth gunfire, one was calm enough to notice the beautiful Quarian in the doorway and leapt forward with happiness.

"Tali? Is that really you? Oh Keelah, we thought we were going to be killed by those Geth. It's amazing you came here in time. How did you get past them? When I locked the door, there was a Geth Prime chasing us. A Prime! How did you kill it?" Del's excited voice had quickly turned to doubt, as he couldn't understand how Tali had seemingly dealt with the mechanical monster alone.

"I didn't do it alone, Del. I had some help from a new friend."

With that, Noble Six walked forward, the synthetic fluids of multiple Geth covering his armor. To Del, the sight was both relieving and terrifying; a friendly soldier helping him, yet covered in the 'blood' of numerous enemies. It frightened him just as much as it

calmed him.

Despite the momentary lapse, Del was aware enough to walk forward and thank the Spartan. "Thank you, whoever you are. If Tali says you helped, that's enough for me to know you helped save our lives. The Migrant Fleet is forever in your debt, human." He noticed the hands with five fingers, quickly revealing to him the soldier's race. Del courteously nodded his head, the Spartan before him returning the gesture.

"The path to our shuttle should be clear now, Del. You can take everyone there and get off Haestrom. Reegar and a few wounded marines made it too; they'll be going with you." Tali politely stepped into the conversation, eager to keep them moving.

"You won't be coming with us?" The Quarian sounded more upset than surprised.

Tali made a slight move back on one leg, and turned her face slightly away from him. "No, Del. I am going to join Six and Shepard. They have an important mission for me to join. And now that you are all safe and we have the data, I have the Admirals' permission for an extended leave of absence. They just thought I'd report back to the fleet first." She trailed off, thinking of how her father would react. Unhappily, most likely.

"Shepard? You mean the one you spent your pilgrimage with? He's on Haestrom?"

"Yea, Del. That's who I came here with. Shepard and the other members of the ground team are still in the complex, clearing out the remaining Geth. Shepard and his squad should be linking up with us shortly."

Before Six had a chance to radio the other squads, Shepard, Garrus, and Grunt were standing at the doorway into the room they occupied. Garrus and Shepard each had a slight look of amazement, neither able to form any words. Grunt was simply excited by the carnage that lay behind them, and was able to speak for all of them. "Nicely done, human. It looks like I won't have to kill you for being weak. Even a Krogan battlemaster would be impressed with the carnage you created! Hah, if only we could have been there with you!" The Krogan warrior affectionately smashed his fists together with a toothy grin. Apparently, if you were a worth warrior, as Noble Six was, you are quickly accepted by Grunt.

Shepard, now able to compose himself, stepped forward to speak to Tali rather than congratulate Six on his controlled slaughter. He simply nodded in approval when he passed the Spartan who stood stoically.

"Tali, are you alright? We saw some of the fight from the far side of the courtyard."

"Then you know that Noble Six did all the work. I'm fine though, Shepard. Thanks for asking." Tali put her arm on Shepard, the most she could do to convey a smile through her visor. "This whole mission was a mess Shepard." She motioned for Shepard and Garrus to walk to the side with her, away from the other Quarians and Shepard's other squad mates. Grunt simply huffed, while Six nodded and walked back to

the doorway as a guardian. "The Admiralty Board sent us here to gather data on the star, Dholen. Then we got attacked by the Geth. Most of the marines got killed protecting meâ€|" Tali paused for a moment, the 'faces' of all her friends flashing through her mind. At least Reegar had made it. "The only reason the science team made it was him." Tali simply looked towards Six; there was no need for her to point to him.

"Yea, we caught a little of the action ourselves. And we found what was left after himâ€|" Garrus decided it had been long enough since he had spoken, but even he found it impossible to form a sarcastic remark. He was in awe of the new human as much as everyone else.

Six was simply standing over to their side, looking at them with his arms crossed. Well, he appeared to be looking at them. The Spartan seemed to understand what they were talking about... It was easy for them to be given away, as they all were looking at the armored-clad human, towering over the Quarians occupying the space around him.

"He's certainly proved himself capable of handling himself, even against a strong force of Geth troopers and heavy platforms. I was almost certain we could trust him, and now I have no doubt that Noble Six is going to be an ally for the war against the Collectors and Reapers. What do you think Tali?" Shepard was cool and composed now, his awe of the Spartan now subsided. He turned to Tali and crossed his arms, smirking just a little, knowing exactly what she was going to say.

"He's already saved my life, and the lives of my team. I wasn't going to get off Haestrom without him, and even you may have been too late Shepardâ€| You'll have to tell me more about him when we get on the Normandy. It should be safe to move the wounded, and after they are stabilized in the medbay, they can leave for the Migrant Fleet without me. "Tali turned from Shepard with that, waving to Del. "Get the wounded ready, Del. We're getting off Haestrom for good."

Shepard smiled again, this time with a nod and raised his hand to his ear. "Miranda, it's Shepard. Ready the Kodiaks for take-off. We're taking the wounded Quarians with us; then we can continue the mission on Illium."

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Author's Note:

Well the biggest question first is Kat. Comment with what you think; it's too late to remove her, and I personally really want her in the story as a ghost. But if most of my reviews turn out negative, I'll work on improving it if you mention how you think I should do that. Thanks!

Yes, I am very sorry for the extended delay. Between football season starting, school, and work I have had trouble keeping motivated. I also haven't been playing Mass Effect since around the last update, and that's the biggest thing keeping me on track. Realistically, it will probably be another month before I get the Mass Effect 2 itch,

but I'll try to keep working ahead. Don't worry; as I've said before, I will finish, but won't rush it. Sorry if it takes a while but I want the story exactly how I feel it should be told.

As always, comments and reviews are very helpful and appreciated. Having a review or two every week in my email keeps a fire under me, so that's always useful to motivate me!

WOLF, tigerwar, RunRincewindRun, S4pphi, Rydan fallâ€¦. Thanks for all the help over the past couple months while I have been writing this. And everyone else that simply reads and keeps to themselves, I'm happy knowing some people out there actually enjoy my writing.

THANKS!

7. New Friends

****NORMANDY SR-2****

****CRESCENT NEBULA****

****1 DAY AFTER HAESTROM OPERATION****

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Miranda walked through the door into the communications room with her usual strut, masking all her emotions perfectly. And it was a good thing she could do that; the report she was about to give to the Illusive Man was likely going to upset him. She walked forward to the holo-pad, raised her chin and waited for the scanners to read her and project the Illusive Man's office.

A few moments later, she was looking at that familiar blue star, with her employer seated in his trademark chair, a drink in hand. As usual.

"Miranda, I'm glad to see the operation on Haestrom was a success. We don't need to lose any members of the team before we even get to hitting the Collectors. How was action against the Geth?"

Miranda raised her arm, activating her Omni-tool to project information and statistics about the Geth they encountered on the planet. "It went very well, but I would have liked to have seen more of the fighting myself. Shepard and his squad were the only ones to actually move into the compound. I merely led the team at the LZ. And, of course, the Spartan did most of the work." Miranda now switched the feed on her Omni-tool to show footage of Noble Six on Haestrom. "I was able to recover some video feed from security cameras set up by the Quarians. I'm sure you'll be pleased to see it all yourself."

The leader of Cerberus stood up from his chair, walking towards Miranda and stopped as close as he could without interrupting the holo-feed. "I read your report on the actions of this Noble Six, and the only reason I didn't throw it all out is that I know you would never exaggerate on something so important. If your reports are

accurate, and I believe them to be, we need to convince him to join Cerberus. Shepard won't use him to his full potential, not to mention the technology in his armor that we could use."

Miranda nodded her head in agreement. "Absolutely, but I don't think it will be so easy. We have virtually no knowledge of him: his motives, his desires, his origins. There isn't anything we can use against him as leverage. And attempting to capture him by force would only result in the loss of a team. After observing his combat capabilities, I have no doubt we must avoid any violent confrontation with him."

The mysterious man smiled at her, taking another sip of his drink. "Don't worry about that part, Miss Lawson. We've already seen that he is very social, with the right people. It won't be long before he develops some friendships aboard the Normandy. We'll wait until then, and if he still won't cooperate with us, we'll have our leverage. As for now, keep an eye on him and see what you can learn about his motives. Report back to me when you have learned anything of value." The Illusive Man walked back to his chair, switched the feed off, and Miranda walked out of the comm room with purpose.

She had a new task, and it was going to be easy.

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The Spartan was finally getting some of the rest he deserved. He was in his new quarters, comfortably sprawled out on the sofa he was given to act as his bed for the time being. The commander said he would get a chance to do some shopping on this next planet once they docked.

Shopping? Shepard obviously didn't pay attention to the fact that Six spent almost his entire life in the military. The Spartan had survived countless battles and campaigns, even Reach. None of them ever scared him, but this new task actually intimidated him a littleâ€¦

He shook the idea out of his mind; no need to get wrapped up in it yet. He could enjoy himself for some time still. He stood up and walked over to the large observation window. The Normandy was in sub-light speed, and it gave him a nice view of the nebula they were in. They were also flying past a gas giant, and the Normandy's pilot must have been eager to see it. Six grabbed the codex he had spent the past day reading, and found that it was named Thail. "Thail is a typical hydrogen-helium gas giant. Well, no sense in looking at it then, heh. It's just a massive planet that supplies resources for entire worldsâ€¦" He turned around and walked back to the sofa, sitting down and putting his legs up on the table in front of him.

"Making yourself comfortable, lieutenant?" Leliana was 'sitting' on the table in front of him, her data chip projecting her image up. She was smirking, standing with her arms crossed at Six. "I don't remember ONI letting you settle down long enough to relax like this." She stretched arms and yawned to emphasize her new situation. "Even after Truth was killed, we spent a lot of time with the Sangheili hunting down Loyalist resistance. It's nice to relaxâ€¦" Six looked

at her, puzzled by her comments. "What? AIs need time to relax too. We can actually get bored helping you humans too much."

"Hmm, whatever you say, Leliana. And yes, it is nice to actually have time for more than sleeping and eating. I'm excited to spend some time on a mission that isn't a strict military op. Commander Shepard seems to give his crew a great deal of freedom; but they don't seem to take advantage of him. They obviously respect him even more for letting them relax without worrying about too many rules and regs." Six got up and walked to the corner of his room, looking at his armor, now mounted on a stand provided by Jacob from the armory. Six was surprised they had a stand that would hold his armor. Then again, it was for Krogan armor. "I'm glad we spent some extra time in the ONI armory before the portal test, Leliana. This whole mess could've been a lot worse if I hadn't installed the extra components on this new Mark VII."

He looked his grey MJOLNIR armor over, impressed with it all: The operator shoulder pieces, HP/Parafoil chest piece, TACPAD wrist attachment, Commando helmet with UA/FC-I[2] attachments, and the soft case. The recent addition on the armor's right leg piece caught his attention. He had a sheath for the knife installed as soon as he got the new armor. The technicians kept questioning him on why he would want a combat knife when he had the new energy dagger.

They never would understand.

"You know what Six; I think Emile would be honored that you might get the chance to kill some more bad guys with his kukri." Leliana interrupted the Spartan's thought, almost psychically able to guess what he was thinking about. "That's why he gave it to you, on Reach."

Six winced at the thought of his friend. He didn't like talking about Noble, and Leliana seemed to enjoy tormenting him with the topic whenever she had the chance. He simply tried ignoring the AI for the time being.

"You're ignoring me again, lieutenant."

"What do you want me to say? You know what happened and that I don't want to talk about them. Ever. Why do you even give a damn!" Obviously she hadn't been aware for the conversation with Kat, or that would've been brought up already.

Leliana's expressed shock at his comment, causing her to shift back slightly. Six also realized his outburst, shifting to the side and removing the look of anger from his face. He only shrugged at her now, unable to say any more. His silence gave her a chance to speak. "I give a damn because you're my Spartan, my friend. I guess my only friend. I care because I see how much it all torments you every day. If you really don't want to say anything about it, fine; I'll honor your wish. But don't try and pretend you can just deal with this alone." She smiled slightly at him, trying her best to console him, given her inability to ever physically interact with him. "Tell you what, Six. Why don't you put your armor on and let's have a look around this ship. I think we both could use some air so to speak." She giggled a little, her girlish personality showing through the extensive ONI programming designs.

Six was trying to think of an excuse to fire back at her, but he realized that he couldn't stay mad at her for caring. "Alright, Leliana. You win. I'll get dressed and then we'll have a look around and talk to some of the crew.

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Six spent the next hour walking around the Normandy, with no apparent destination in mind. After leaving his quarters and making a lap around each level, the Spartan decided to stay on the crew deck and see what everyone on the Normandy did in their spare time. Mostly they just spent the hours in the mess hall, where Cerberus had plenty of seating for everyone to socialize and enjoy movies on the screens and their Omni-tools. Or vids, or whatever they liked to call them. He spent a few minutes with the mess sergeant, Gardner. Six found that even though they weren't on a true military op, he still would be 'rewarded' with standard military rations.

'_Great, I finally get out of the hands of ONI and what do they feed me? Nutrient paste and MREs. Shouldn't have been so optimisticâ€|'

—

Still, Six was happy to learn that the crew could get a meal in the mess hall whenever they weren't on duty. One benefit of the Normandy was its less-than strict funding, allowing Gardner to replenish food as often as he pleased.

Six saluted the Mess Sergeant, earning a lazy excuse of a salute in return. He didn't think it was Shepard's loose command though; Gardner appeared to be someone that would act that way even if the Illusive Man was present.

Continuing his stroll, he made his way into the forward battery to find Garrus hard at work on the Normandy's weapon systems. "Hey Garrus, got a minute to talk?"

The Turian, shrugged a bit, but turned to speak with Six. "Only for a bit Six, I'm in the middle of some calibrations." Garrus leaned back against his console, crossing his arms. "What's it been like on the Normandy so far?"

"Better than expected, I guess. But I really don't know what to expect. This is all pretty bizarre to me. I spend a few hours with you and Shepard, and everyone seems to trust me already. Can you tell me about that?"

Garrus chuckled a little at the Spartan, clearly amused at his confusion. "Yea, I had a feeling you'd ask one of us about that soon enough. Most of the crew members here trust the commander, and if he thinks you can be trusted, they believe in Shepard enough to go along with it. But don't think everyone you meet, especially some of the Cerberus loyal, will be so trusting. As for me, I spent my entire career at C-Sec. I've had a lot of time getting to know how to read people, and you seem alright. Heh, and it didn't hurt that you were so quick to help on the Haestrom mission. You sealed the deal with your rescue of Tali."

Six laughed a little at the Turian, smiling behind his visor. "Yea, I

kind of got the feeling you and the commander are good friends with her. What's the story behind it all?"

Garrus stood up off his console at that question, waving his arm. "That's a long story Six, and I need to get back to work. Why don't you go up to the CIC and ask Shepard. He's usually just standing around the Galaxy Map anyways." Garrus laughed one more time at his own joke, and turned back to his calibrations, waving a hand over his shoulder without turning back to the Spartan.

Six simply shrugged, turning to leave the room and proceed back to the lift. "Alright Leliana, you get to decide if we go see Shepard or not. I spend enough time making the decisions about what we do, it's time you had a chance. Just remember, I get to do all the talking if we visit him." He smiled a little, knowing the AI would be able to see him inside his helmet.

"Hmmm, I could let you go talk to Shepard, and enjoy yourself more. Then again, you did get pretty beat up on that last mission. Maybe we should just stay back in our quarters and take the day offâ€|"

"Well now you're just insulting me. I barely drew any blood on Haestrom and you already sound like a worried field medic. You just blew your chance to decide; we're going to pay the commander a visit."

"Hmmpf, and I thought we were friends!"

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The CIC reminded Six a lot of the command bridges on UNSC ships; it was relatively small, each crew member worked at his own station with holo interfaces, and the pilot was situated at the front of the ship. He also noticed the Galaxy Map had an unmistakable resemblance to a Sangheili shipâ€|. The projection of the ship's current location was all too familiar to the Separatist ship's he had spent the past five years travelling on hunting the Loyalists. And of the corvette he once capturedâ€|

"Lieutenant, it's good to see you out and about the ship. How have you settled in so far?" Shepard's voice snapped him back to reality, reminding him why he had gone to the command deck. "Have you talked to any of the crew?"

"Just Mess Sergeant Gardner, sir. I was happy to learn that we can have a meal any time we want on the Normandy. It's a nice change from the military operations I've spent my entire life with. Usually, I don't get much more freedom than the chance to sleep and to exercise."

"Speaking of what you're used to lieutenant, I'd like to learn a little more about you; if you don't mind. I know we had a short talk before the mission on Haestrom, and you told me a little about your life. But the combat capabilities you showed us on the missionâ€| it just wasn't something I was expecting, even though you essentially told us. Tell me more about the Spartan program you're from. I know you said you want to leave your personal life closed off, I understand that. But considering the circumstances, I need to know a

little about you, especially if I am going to place my full trust in you during a fire fight."

Six was still a newcomer to this galaxy, and he wasn't exactly comfortable telling anyone about his life. But Shepard had proven he trusted him enough, and deserved a little information on his background. Hell, Six knew he would be more skeptical if Shepard had been the one getting zapped into his home universe. "You're right, commander. And you've more than earned a few stories about me. I only ask you don't tell anyone else on the ship. At least for now." Shepard nodded in acknowledgement, obviously respectful of the Spartan's wishes. "Like I said to you before, in my galaxy humans were being hunted to extermination by an alien conglomerate known as the Covenant. The war began in 2525, on a colony world we called Harvest. The Covenant discovered the planet, and their leaders, three Prophets referred to as 'hierarchs' almost immediately declared humanity an affront to their gods. We fought the next 27 years against them, continually losing ground, or more specifically, planets. Because humanity was in such a desperate situation, Spartan IIIs were recruited from early childhood to help turn the tide of the war. I was only six when I was inducted. Some of the other candidates were older; my previous commander, Carter, was 11 when he was inducted. But it didn't really matter; we were all designed to stop the Covenant. And while we had a significant impact on the war, we didn't truly change the outcome until August, 2552, on a planet called Reach."

Emotions swept over the Spartan at the thought, reminding him of all he lost on that God-forsaken hunk of rock. All the friends he lost.

"I got my current call sign during that campaign. In July of 2552, or five years ago for me, I was assigned as a replacement to Noble Team, as the sixth member. Originally, I was designated to help with the local insurrection. But the Covenant had discovered Reach almost as soon as I arrived. To fill you in on the importance of this, Reach was the main military outpost of the UNSC, even more so than Earth. It was almost as well kept a secret as Earth, too. We had hundreds of millions of military personnel on the planet, and it was the last significant defense for Earth and the Sol system. We spent over a month fighting, but eventually the Covenant overpowered us and won. The only reason we even survived that is because of a last-ditch effort by me and the surviving members of my team to deliver a data packet off-world. A data packet that eventually turned the war in our favor. About a month after Reach fell the Sangheili, and some of the other Covenant races, joined the UNSC in an alliance and helped us defeat the remaining Covenant, who had found Earth. Tensions still ran high, obviously, but I've spent the past five years conducting joint operations with the Separatists against the Covenant Loyalist forces. It was really just propaganda and good-will; Humans and Sangheili working together after so many years of killing each other. Jun, the only other member of Noble to survive Reach, has also been with me since. Well, until now, of course. And to put this war in perspective, the UNSC guesses about 23 billion humans were lost during those 28 years."

Shepard calmly looked at the lieutenant, very understanding of his situation. "I won't pretend I know exactly what you mean, Six, but I've been a soldier since I was 18, and I've seen close friends die too. It isn't easy, and it never gets easy." Shepard chuckled a

little and formed a weak smile, obviously reminiscing about those he just referred to. "But I want to ask you this: did you do everything you could to save the other members of your team?"

Six pulled his head back a little, being surprised Shepard was more interested in asking about a few dead soldiers he never met, rather than the Great War. "Absolutely, Spartans always give their all."

The commander smiled at him, and placed his arm up on the Spartan's shoulder. "Then you have nothing to be ashamed of Six. I may have only just met you, but I already know you will always give everything you can for your companions. And that's all that can be asked of a soldier. Now, why don't you ask me something about myself, and the mission we're on? I bet you like being prepared."

The Spartan contemplated what Shepard had said for several moments, secretly thankful his face was masked at the moment. Hearing his commanding officers say Reach was never his fault was one thing; they simply wanted to keep his morale up to ensure his combat abilities. But Shepard was different, he was new. He didn't have the same motivations, and hearing that from him made it all the more different. And better.

"Umm yes sir. Forget the Reapers and Collectors for now; I'm sure I'll get up to speed on them soon. Can you tell me about this planet we're going to now? Illium, right?"

"That's correct, Six. It's an Asari world, one of the most dominant alien races in the galaxy. It's an all-female race; well, sort of. Technically they are mono-gender, but their looks and personality scream female. Heh, you'll see soon enough. But they are the oldest space-faring race in the galaxy, and command a great deal of respect from most other races. Don't let their looks fool you; they are all extremely dangerous, with natural biotic abilities. As for Illium, I've never been there before, so we're in the same boat for that part. We'll be stopping to recruit a couple members for the team. I don't know much about either, other than what the Illusive Man's dossiers have on them. I'll forward them to your Omni-tool. You can read them if you like. Once we dock, I want you to come on the shore party; I'll be taking one team to locate the Asari Justicar, and Garrus is taking the second team to recruit an assassin. I thought you two would work well together; Tali will go as well to help with any technical problems you come across. We'll be arriving in Nos Astra, the port, in about 6 hours. Why don't we cut this conversation short so you have time to rearm and rest?"

"That would be just fine, sir. Jacob is going to be pretty upset I trashed a few of his new guns on my first mission, heh heh." He shrugged a little, knowing Shepard understood the wear and tear in normal combat. Even if jumping out of a starship isn't actually normal combat.

"Good. Meet us at the forward airlock at 1900, and you, Garrus and Tali will be on your own from there."

Six nodded in agreement, and turned back to the elevator to return to his room, but before he could hit the button, Shepard had one more thing to say.

"Oh, by the way lieutenant; why don't you head down to engineering and speak with Tali. It would be good if you two talked a little to just to get to know each other. And I know Tali will want to thank you again for everything you did on Haestrom."

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Ever since she had arrived on the Normandy, she had been doing nothing but working in the engine room. The other Quarrians from her mission were all treated by Chakwas and a few other crewmembers, and they refused to let Tali help.

'You need your rest, Tali. Go to the crew quarters and relax.' She could hear Chakwas as if she were next to her now.

They should have known it was in vain. While they barred her from entering the med bay, she couldn't just lounge around when there was something she could do. And thanks to Shepard's command, she was given all the access she needed to engineering; even it meant that the Cerberus officer onboard wasn't happy about it. She smiled a little. Knowing that Shepard was still in charge, and wasn't going to bend to the Illusive Man made her terrible day just a little better.

Besides, the Normandy engineers could use some help with the drive core. While Ken and Gabby were more than capable engineers, they had very little real experience with the type of drive core on the Normandy. Tali's past experience on the original Normandy was already proving invaluable as she had optimized the engine another 5%.

'_Keelah, I missed thisâ€|'_ Tali thought to herself, still uncomfortable around the other engineers. '_I wish Adams was still on the ship.'_

While she missed the old faces, she reminded herself that she still had Shepard to share time with. And Garrus, of course. Even though he constantly teased her, she wouldn't change it ever. The two had developed a relationship like two close siblings, and she was happy he was back like the past two years hadn't happened. And then the new one, _Noble Six_. He wasn't a Cerberus operative, and Shepard and Garrus barely could tell her anything about him, either.

'_Noble Six obviously isn't his real name. I wonder where he's from. Maybe from some country back on Earth? I'll have to ask him sometime we get a chance to talk.'_

Before she could continue thinking to herself, Tali heard the door behind her slide open. Expecting Ken or Gabby and not turning around, she noticed they were both working to her right, at their designated stations. Now deciding to face the newcomer, she spun around and was surprised she had to look up. Noble Six, in his full combat armor, was standing right in front of her.

"Miss Zorah, I'm glad to see you are settled in to the Normandy. I heard from a few people earlier that you spend almost all your time down here. I hope that doesn't mean you can't talk for a bit." Six crossed his arms sarcastically, hoping Tali would pick up on his body

language.

Giggling a little while she answered him "Heh, of course I can talk to you, Six. You did just save me and my teams' lives. I was actually hoping we could talk a little. I still have a lot of questions for you, and I'd be happy to answer anything you want to know about me or Quarrians. Shepard told me your story mostly. If anyone besides Shepard or Garrus told me, I would never believe it. But after what you did on Haestrom, I can't think of any other explanation."

"Well I'm glad that part's out of the way. Right after we got back on the Normandy yesterday, I had to listen to Joker ramble on about how I'm a spy for some 'Shadow Broker.' I still have no idea what that is. And even though Shepard and Garrus have been nice, I still get some weird stares around the ship; I don't blame anyone, but it doesn't mean I have to like it."

Tali, now especially excited at the thought's Six has, threw her arms slightly in the air while talking. "You have no idea how nice it is to talk with someone that thinks that, Six! I'm sure you know enough about Quarrians now that we aren't exactly welcome everywhere." He nodded a yes to her, keeping her on the same topic. "And being stuck in these suits is one of the reasons. No one ever sees our faces; not even when we are among ourselves can we do that. It's too much of a risk. Now that I'm thinking about it, why are you still wearing all your armor? Isn't it really heavy?"

"Heh, well technically it is Tali. It weighs 1,000 pounds. But it's completely powered, and it actually makes me a lot stronger. I could punch a hole through the ship's bulkhead if I really needed to. But don't worry, I'm usually can control my temperâ€¦" They both laughed a little, happy they each could talk to someone after a long day. "To answer your other question, I just like wearing it. Even though I can take it off, I wear it so much that I feel a little uncomfortable without it on. I sort of like keeping my face hidden from people I don't know well." He shrugged a little, adding one more thing. "But you and Garrus seem like good people, err, aliens. Not that I think of you as some weird alien, I meanâ€¦ I'm happy I at least met you. And Garrus of course." Six rubbed the back of his neck, suddenly finding himself in an awkward situation.

"Heh, you're pretty funny Six. And yes, I'm excited for the next few months when we work together. I'm not too happy being around so many Cerberus people. At least you, Garrus and I can keep each other company. And Shepard, of course. He isn't one of them. But I really should clean up this engine more, though. We'll talk later?"

"Yea, plan on it Tali. We'll have to go to the mess hall later with Garrus and all three of us can more. I can tell you both more about me then."

"Great! We'll have a lot of fun Six. See you later!"

With that, Tali waved a little and turned back to her console, typing as though she hadn't even spent a second talking to Six. With no reason to stay now, the lieutenant turned around and headed back to the elevator.

'_I'm happy I at least met you?' What the hell were you saying Six, you met her one day ago!' _

"Well you managed to make yourself look like a complete dork, lieutenant. Maybe you can ask her out to go get ice cream after the school dance tonight."

"Hey, I didn't nearly sound that bad! And I don't know what came over me; I just felt out of place for a moment. I'm sure it was just a one-time thing. You just make sure not to join in on a conversation with her. I don't think Shepard talked to her yet about you."

"Well, considering she didn't ignore you or try and put a bullet in your head, I'd say he hasn't felt a strong urge to mention anything yet. That's fine anyways; I'm happy just watching you make a fool of yourself. Come on; let's go back to our room before you completely blow your chances with your crush. Oh, and you didn't even ask about the mission tomorrow."

"Come on Leliana, I just made a mistake. And it's not like I have some crush on a girl I just met. And an alien one on top of that. We have a mission to focus on, that's where my head is now."

Six hit the side of his head, a symbolic slap to Leliana, and hit the up arrow on the elevator.

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Well I know this chapter was short, but I wanted to start Nos Astra in its own chapter. And I also realize it has been exactly three months since I updated this. And for those of you still bored enough to read, thanks. It's really nice to know someone thinks this stuff is fun.

As always, please leave comments in the review page. I'm always happy to have criticism, just please don't be an ass about it.

I realize I made up the part of Spartans working with the Separatists after the war in clean up duty. But I have a purpose for putting Six and Jun in that, so don't get too upset. Remember, it's a fan fic and I just want to change a little bit.

Any suggestions on recruiting Thane, let me know!

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Just as an edit note, I changed Six's helmet to the Commando with UA/FC-I[2] attachments. Just the helmet I use in Halo: Reach, so I figured I could make a quick change here too.

8. The New Team

"So, ugh, Noble Six; what are you doing up here already? We kind of need to be docked before you can get off the ship." Joker's sarcasm was prevalent as ever, and he clearly had no reservations about subjecting Six to his normal insults. The Spartan was happy to hear it, though. It was nice that he wasn't going to be treated

differently by someone here. Even in his own galaxy, Six was constantly being looked up to by marines as a legend, and looked down with disgust by some of his ONI superiors.

"Very funny, Joker. I guess that's how you got your nickname? Acting like a complete ass around people you just met?" Six chuckled a little to himself, amused by his own joke.

"Hah hah, very funny Six. You know, I could have EDI suck you out of the airlock for insulting me on my bridge." He turned over to look at her avatar, pulsing gently as if unfazed by the argument before her.

"Actually, that is not one of my functions on the Normandy, Mr. Moreau. I am installed on this ship to assist in cyber warfare andâ€¦"

"Yea I got it EDI! It was supposed to be a joke. Besides, since the lieutenant never takes that armor off, throwing him out an airlock would only piss him off. Do you wear that all the time Six?"

Six moved closer to the pilot, putting his arm on his shoulder. "Only for you Joker; only for you."

"Geez, and the rest of the crew usually complains about _me_ making sick jokes. Looks like we have a new creep on board."

"Am I interrupting anything, Joker? It sounds like you and Noble Six are starting to become best friends?" Shepard's early arrival was actually quite welcome, by both Joker and the other Cerberus personnel that were unfortunate enough to hear the whole conversation. The commander stood over the pilot with a big, toothy grin, clearly amused that someone was actually brave enough to tease Joker.

"Glad you got here when you did, Shepard. This guy's a real piece of work. I say we go back to Canalsus and throw him in the hole we found him in."

"Joker, that's no way to treat a guest on your ship. I'm _shocked_ you'd say such a thing!" The Spartan threw his hands in the air while he spoke, adding even more sarcasm to his snarky conversation.

"You knowâ€¦ I'm gonna let you have that one Six, but only because you called the Normandy 'my ship' and not Shepard's. One time only, though."

"Ok you two, that's enough. Six, I just came up from the crew deck and Garrus and Tali are still having something to eat before the mission. We aren't on a tight schedule, so why don't you go down and join them? I'll be leaving with Miranda, Kasumi and Mordin as soon as we dock in Nos Astra. We'll be looking for the Justicar Samara. Like I've told you, your team will be searching for the assassin. I don't know this planet well, but Garrus should know enough to get started. And one other thing, lieutenant: the law is a lot looser on a planet like Illium. Technically, we aren't even in Citadel Space. So be careful. It's a lot more common to have mercenary groups running security everywhere. And they are big believers in the 'shoot first' philosophy of life."

"Got it, sir. You can count on us to get this job done."

Shepard smiled at the Spartan, standing back and crossing his arms. "You know, between you, Garrus and Tali, I think I might just be able to take the next few missions off. What do you think?"

"I think you would just get bored sitting on the Normandy all day, Shepard."

"Heh, you're probably right Six. Ahh, here's the rest of my squad. We'll talk later, Six. Good luck on your mission." The three he had been waiting for all showed up together, Kasumi and Mordin offering the Spartan a smile, while Miranda barely looked at him out of the corner of her eye.

"Just in time you guys, we're just about to dock in the business district. Bring back some better food, Shepard" said Joker.

"That's not within the Illusive Man's budget, pilot." The Cerberus ice queen had no problems speaking for Shepard, even if it only lasted for a few moments.

"Actually, that sounds great, Joker. If we have time after finding the Justicar, I'll see what we can do."

Miranda turned an icy glare at Shepard, only to be answered with a sarcastic smile from him. The four then turned to leave, the airlock closing behind them and leaving Six alone, as Joker was now strongly focused on dealing with Illium Customs and Regulations agents on his view screen.

"That Miranda girl sure is keeper, isn't she Six." Leliana seemed to feel as though she need to ensure her opinion was known to him. "I don't like the look of her. Do you want me to try and spy on her using those Cerberus surveillance bugs?"

"What? No, Leliana. I think she's trouble too. But let her try and scheme. Do you really think she can get any useful from either of us? She and the Illusive Man will figure out soon enough that we're here because Shepard is a leader worth following, not to satisfy the wishes of Cerberus."

"Whatever you say, Six. But if some Cerberus soldiers show up wearing MJOLNIR copiesâ€¦"

"Do you really think they are smart enough to do that just from spying on us a little?"

"Well, no. But I just don't like not having any knowledge on her. But I'll leave her alone. Maybe she is just a pain in the ass."

"Spoken just like a true ladyâ€¦ But forget Miranda. Let's go down and see what we can do to get Garrus and Tali moving."

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"Hey Tali, what do you think of Six? I mean, we're working with him on a mission without Shepard now. How do you feel?"

"You aren't actually worried he's some spy for the Shadow Broker, are you? I thought only Miranda was silly enough to think thatâ€¦"

"What? No! I just want to know what you think of him, you know, as a person. You're the only one of us that's really seen him in battle; I just saw him scare a few Krogan on the Citadel, and Shepard just talked to him a few times. And didn't he come down to engineering and chat with you last night?"

"Yes, we talked a little while I was cleaning up the engines. He seems really nice, and I think he's actually happy here." Tali giggled a little, and leaned in towards Garrus so she could whisper to him. "He said a few embarrassing things when we talked; I don't think he spends very much time with regular people. But I like him so far. What has Shepard got the three of us doing?"

"Hmph, I don't really like it that much. We're going to be looking for this assassin, and the Illusive Man doesn't have a name for us. But he's a drell, and he's the best in his business."

"So what aren't you happy about? We want the best people on this mission, don't we?"

"Yea, but he's an assassin Tali. That means he kills people for money. People who could be anyone from an honest politician fighting corruption to some unlucky guy who just pissed someone off. I spent a long time on Omega fighting people just like him."

Tali wasn't surprised once Garrus had explained himself. He was always an idealist ever since she met him two years ago on the Citadel. Even so, she wouldn't blame anyone for feeling that way about a gun for hire. "I see your point, Garrus. But this mission is too big to ignore someone useful. I still hate Cerberus, but I know we have to work together to stop the Collectors. I know you can understand that."

"I never said I didn't. It doesn't mean I like it either, Tali. Besides, I don't plan on working with this guy unless Shepard makes me. It sounds like I'll be spending a lot of missions with you and Six. And that's just fine, if you ask me."

"Well, I didn't actually ask you, Garrusâ€¦"

"Very funny, Tali. You know, you joke a lot more since when we were hunting Saren down. What caused the big change?"

"It's nothing really, Garrus. I'm just a lot more comfortable around everyone now, especially you and Shepard. I guess I'm that way around my friends. And I figured someone had to put you in your place once in a while. Hey Six! Come sit with us!" Tali cut herself off, standing to wave at the lieutenant as he was turning around the elevator shaft. He noticed quickly, walking over to sit down next to Garrus and across from Tali.

"Hey you two, Shepard told me you were relaxing a little before we go out. Aren't you two worried he'll find the Justicar before we get this assassin? I don't want him to think we're lazy."

"Don't worry Six, I've got us covered. I found out from one of my old C-Sec contacts that our old friend Liara T'Soni is working here now as an information broker. Her office is just down the street from our dock space. We go see her, and she'll point us in the right direction to find out target. It's easy as that."

"Liara is here? Keelah, I haven't heard from her since we got off the first Normandyâ€¦ Why would she be working in the information business? I just figured she'd go right back to her excavation sites." Tali had clearly spent too much time with the Migrant Fleet to keep up with things.

"I didn't get that part from my contact. I would've said the same thing as you, Tali. We'll just have to ask her, I guess."

"Do one of you mind telling me about this Leeara Tuh Soni? Sounds like the three of you have some history."

Tali was the first to speak. "Of course we do, Six. She was another member of Shepard's first team, when we were hunting Saren. I'm sure you read about him, at least, in your codex. Liara is an Asari, just like most of the people on this world. When you meet her, you're going to think she's younger than me. She's quiet, naÃ¬ve, timidâ€¦"

"Really, really attractiveâ€¦"

"Garrus! I'm going to tell her you said that! And Shepard!"

"Go right ahead. You and I both know she'll just blush and stumble over her own words, heh. And Shepard will just agree with me."

"Well, you probably are right. Anyways, Six. Despite that, Liara is over 100 years old. Asari will usually live to be around 1,000 years old. She is still a child in her own culture, so people often overlook how smart she really is. Whatever we get from her, I promise it's worth trusting."

"Just don't try and talk to her. Since you're new, she'd probably be too shy to even put a full sentence together."

"Ignore Garrus, Six. Hey, we should get going anyways. I don't mind if Shepard beats us sometimes, but I don't want to see Miranda finish her mission before we do!"

Garrus stood up, stretching his arms and yawning out a somewhat mumbled sentence. "Alright Tali, you're probably right. Let's go before Six has to listen to us anymore. I bet he's itching to see what Illium looks like."

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The sun was setting on the horizon of Illium, painting a most spectacular view for the three new teammates to watch as they made their way through the trade market of Nos Astra. The forest of skyscrapers reminded Six of New York. While he rarely had the chance to visit, several military parties and political meetings between the

UNSC and Sangheili leadership were held in Manhattan, allowing him to visit. It was one of the few occasions that the Spartan actually was given several days of shore leave, and he always spent them exploring the city. He was excited to see what the rest of Nos Astra would be like. He made his way over to a railing overlooking the rest of the city, enjoying the view of the area.

"This is quite the city the Asari have, especially when it's just a colony world. It looks like they have a real boom in business. Seems like a place to spend some time."

"You know Six, everyone in Citadel space is always told how Illium is one of the safest places in the galaxy. Illium Travel and Tourism routinely cites the planet's low crime rate and glamour as reasons to visit. All that is true, until you fall off the grid. All you have to do is sign the wrong contract, join the wrong company, or just go down the wrong alley. Don't let the lights and money fool you: it's no safer here than Omega."

"And you think another big city is any better than that? That's just what you get when you have so many people competing for power and money. I doubt Illium is worse than New York, or whatever the capital of Palaven is."

Garrus was slightly shocked to hear Six mention Palaven, both because he was upset someone would compare it to something like Illium, and that Six even was familiar with it. The planet Garrus grew up on was the model of Turian honor and integrity; but the Spartan was probably right. "Maybe so. Just make sure not to sign anything while we're here. You could end up working corporate security for 15 years."

"Heh, thanks for clarifying that Garrus, but I wasn't planning on doing anything like that. We're here to get the assassin, oh and Shepard gave me an account for purchasing some things for my quarters. Speaking of it, want to help me with that Tali? I kind of need a girl's opinion on that kind of stuff. I don't really shop much, err, ever."

"Sure, Six, umm that sounds like fun. I'd be glad to help you." In truth, she was just an inexperienced as the Spartan. Life aboard the Fleet can do that to someone. But she was eager to get to know him better, and it sounded fun.

"Thanks, it should be a lot of fun. More than listening to Garrus talk how horrible this great looking city is."

"Funny, Spartan. But let's stay focused. Liara's office is just up those stairs over there. Why don't we go pay her a visit and find out what she knows about the assassin? And remember to keep your sarcasm meter down, Six. Liara will either become as red as a malum, or miss it entirely. So just be nice and let us do the talking."

"Red as a malum?"

"Yea, it's a fruit from Palaven. Sort of like those apples you humans eat to keep doctors away."

Garrus turned around and started walking to Liara's office, giving Six the chance to whisper something in Tali's ear. "Humans don't

really eat apples for that. They're just a nice snack, heh."

They both snickered a little, cutting it short so they could catch back up to Garrus quickly and without him noticing.

As the three made their way up the stairs to see Liara, another Asari was quick to stand from her desk and stop the newcomers. She was the first one Six had a chance to see up close, and he was very intrigued by her. While none of the aliens in the former Covenant looked anything like humans, Six was finding that several other species in this galaxy resembled his kind. Besides the blue skin and tentacle heads, she wasn't any different than any other human girl he could think of.

"Welcome to Illium, Officer Vakarian and Miss Zorah. My name is Nyxeris, and I am Liara T'Soni's assistant. It is an honor to meet the two who were at Commander Shepard's side during the Battle of the Citadel. Regardless of that, friends of Miss T'Soni are always welcome here."

"You know who we are?" There was a small amount of nervousness in Tali's voice, but she did a great job of hiding it behind surprise.

"Of course, Miss Zorah. Liara has become a very successful information broker, and she was happy to learn that you would be coming to see her. You, however, are not known to us. She was very intrigued by your arrival here." Nyxeris was of course referring to Six, standing behind the other two, yet still easily visible standing over them.

"Well we don't want to keep her waiting then. Can we speak to her now?"

"Of course you can." Nyxeris sat back down in her desk, flipping one of the switches on her console. "Miss T'Soni? Your friends are here to see you now."

"Wonderful, please send them in immediately."

"Liara will see you know. Please enjoy your time in our city."

The three all nodded and replied with a polite "thank you" and made their way around the corner and through the next door, opening it quickly.

"Liara, please, give me a break. I've been helping you look for the observer for a month now, I just need more time."

"That is the only thing more valuable to me, and you are squandering what I give you. I'll make you one final deal. Help me solve this in one more week, and I will ignore the credits you owe me. Fail, and you'll find that I can be a very dangerous enemy to fight." She cut the feed on her hologram, leaving the Salarian she was speaking to with a look of terror in his eyes. She turned around, and Garrus and Tali saw she had a very new emotion on her face, one they had never seen before: malevolence. It was quickly replaced with a big smile as she ran over to the three. "Garrus, Tali! It's so good to see you both. It's been far too long.!" She reached out and hugged them both, embracing them for several seconds.

"That sounded pretty serious Liara. What have you been doing for the past two years?" Garrus was quick to offer an opinion, but it was out of shock rather than his usual chattiness.

"Oh, that was nothing Garrus. Just the way you have to speak to some people to motivate them. I wouldn't really hurt him just because of his incompetence. Now, what can I do for the three of you? Oh I almost forgot; we haven't met yet, Spartan." She walked over and offered her hand to Six, who was more than surprised.

"How did you know that?" The Spartan stepped back with one leg and crossed his arms, having no intentions of hiding his skepticism.

"Please, I am an information broker, Spartan. Anything I learn of people is simply good business, and I did nothing myself to learn that. There is simply a rumor about Shepard and someone he found on Canalus. Seeing you, I can tell that it is true. Now, what should I call you?" Liara kept a smile on her face, one that was genuine, if Six had any idea how to read people.

"Just call me Six, Liara. I'm more than happy using that as a name." He took her hand, shaking it more out of respect than comfort. While Garrus and Tali seemed comfortable around her, Liara reminded the Spartan far too much of an ONI operative that knew more than was good for her.

"Back to the reason we're here, Liara. We're looking for an assassin for the team. We figured you'd be the right person to ask." Tali was happy to get a word in the conversation.

"Yes, of course Tali. I'd be happy to help. Let me just look what I have hereâ€¦ That should be right. His name is Thane Krios, a Drell. He's been doing this for a long time. He should be just the person you're looking for. You'll find an Asari, Seryna, down in the cargo transfer offices. Thane spoke to her before he moved to his target, Nassana Dantius. I'm sure you remember her when we were all with Shepard."

"Oh, how could we forget Liara? She's a real gem. Maybe we should let this Krios finish his job before we go searching for himâ€¦ Oh Six, the Asari that Liara is talking about; we met her two years ago on the Citadel. She contacted Shepard about helping rescue her sister. According to Nassana, she was captured by mercenaries and was being held in the Macedon system. We landed on the planet Sharjila and came under fire immediately by the mercenaries. We cleared their base out, but didn't find any hostage. After snooping around some of the files there, we found that Dahlia, Nassana's sister, was the merc leading that outpost. She was blackmailing her sister, and jeopardized her political career." Garrus filled Six in on their history with the Asari's colorful past.

"So Nassana lied so you could silence her sister?" The concept sounded a little too familiar to the Spartan's early days out of training.

"Yea, she's a cold-hearted killer. If we get to meet her, don't let the pretty face fool you. And she'd probably offer you a lot of money to do some of her newest dirty. You knowâ€¦ just in case you want to

leave the Normandy."

"Very funny, Garrus. She sounds wonderful. Can't wait to meet her."

"If you two are finished babbling back and forth like a couple of Salarians, then we should keep focused on Thane. It doesn't sound like we have all the time in the galaxy. When was he supposed to be going after Nassana, Liara?"

"I can't say, Tali. Krios is very good at keeping hidden from even the most watchful eyes. I would suggest speaking to Seryna for any more information. I'm afraid that is all I know of him. I can see she's still at her desk, from a few surveillance bugs I have installed in that area. I wasn't able to help Shepard much either, earlier."

"Wait a second, how did Shepard already talk to you? I didn't tell him you were here" said Garrus.

"Well, I knew the Normandy was docking in the city, so I paid for its administration fees. I wanted to help you all as much as I could. But all I know of the Justicar is that she is registered with a tracking officer. Shepard and your other companions went straight to her after they saw me."

Garrus, frustrated that their jump on Shepard was now wasted, decided they needed to speed things up. "Alright Liara, thanks for all the help with the assassin. Did Shepard ask you to come with us already, or do we have to do that?"

Rather than blush slightly like how Garrus and Tali had come to expect from her, Liara simply answered in a distracted voice. "No, Iâ€| have some things I need to take care of here. When I finish what I have, if you are still searching for the Collectors, I'd be more than happy to come back to the Normandy. But I can't leave until I'm finished. Please though, come back and see me anytime you need helpâ€| or just want to talk." She smiled a little, but far less than the Liara Garrus and Tali were used to.

Everyone stood up, and Tali and Liara hugged each other one more time. Garrus just smiled and nodded to her. Six nodded politely, and was the first one to leave back through the doorway. The three of them waited until they were back on the trade floor before anyone spoke. Garrus, of course, was the first.

"Is it just me, or does Liara seem a littleâ€| different than the last time we were all together?"

"I have no idea what happened to her, Garrus. She used to be so shy and peaceful. She was even more worried around everyone on the Normandy than I was at first. And now the first thing we see her doing is threaten to kill someone. Something must have happened to her after our time on the Normandy. Maybe we should tell Shepard to talk to her. They were really close, until he, well you knowâ€|"

"Hey Tali, are you saying that Shepard and Liara were an item? Is that normal for humans to do?" While most of the conversation between Garrus, Tali, and Liara was meaningless to Six, the idea of a human

and an alien wasâ€| alien! Is this something people in this galaxy did?

"What? Oh, that's right. I guess you wouldn't know any better. In our galaxy, it's not uncommon for members of two separate species toâ€| do that. Especially the Asari. Males and females alike from almost every species find them fascinating. They are very popularâ€| dancers, in many restaurants."

"Heh, I think I get what you mean Tali. Are the Asari the only ones that do that? What about Quarrians?"

Only a split second had passed before Six's face turned beat red, and he thanked God over and over again in his head that his face was hidden. Before Tali could even answer him, Garrus, of course, had to make the moment worse.

"HAH! Six, do you have a crush on Tali? I hope you have a better pick up line than that!"

"Oh, you just shut your scaly mouth Garrus! Six is just interested in learning a little about us, right Six?" Tali turned back to him, seeming to believe that _was_ the Spartan's intention.

"Ugh, yea. Of course Tali. I mean, we just met each other."

'_Dammit, there I did it again!_'

"Ha, well before you two fall in love, let's go find this Seryna. I want to beat Shepard back to the Normandy."

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"Gee ,Lieutenant, you're sure making your move on Tali quickly. I bet you two will be on your first date before we get off Illium." Leliana had been bugging him the entire ride from the space port. Six had quickly taken the back seat in Seryna's hovercar, and Leliana had taken the pleasure of deactivating his armor's audio speakers. "I wish the others could have seen how red your face was!"

The Spartan simply ignored his AI, mostly out of frustration that he had nothing to shoot back at her with. He was going to need a tall drink back on the Normandy later to wash this away.

"Oh ok then, I guess just pout! Can't a girl have a little fun? I swear you have been moody the whole time we've been here."

"Well can you blame me? I've made an idiot of myself twice in front of Tali! I'm just thankful that I didn't creep her out. Sitting next to her in this car is awkward enough as it is. I hope she hasn't been sitting there expecting me to talk to her, since Garrus has been blabbering on with the Asari." He looked out of the corner of his helmet to see Tali sitting, seemingly happy just looking out the window at the city.

"You seem lucky this time, Six. But maybe you should try chatting with her a little; if nothing else she might be bored sitting there

alone and quiet. Just ask about her and the Quarrians; every girl can talk about themselves when you give them a chance."

He thought about it for a little bit, searching his mind for any reasonable excuse to ignore Leliana's suggestion. As usual, she was right and he thought of no reason to ignore Tali any longer. "So ugh, Taliâ€¦ mind if I ask you a little aboutâ€¦"

"Hey, breaks over you two. The Dantius Towers are just around this next corner. Get ready." Seryna interrupted him quickly and very rudely, and she obviously had no problems doing so.

"What was that Six?" Tali turned to him, almost eager to see what he wanted to know.

"Umm, nothing. Don't worry Tali, we can talk about it another time. Let's just focus on the mission for now."

"Alright, we'll talk later then" she said cheerfully, hopping out of the hovercar only moments later when the doors opened.

'_Well, I blew that oneâ€¦_' Six thought to himself._

"You three be careful in there. Remember that she's gonna have Eclipse mercs all over the place. And she's paying them enough to shoot first, and then shoot some more later. Good luck." Seryna closed the doors on her hovercar and took off with haste, leaving the three to fend for themselves.

The team turned to look at the towers, impressed with their grandeur, showing even before the one before them was complete. Just a few moments later, they heard gunshots inside the lobby and saw several Salarrians being gunned down by a group of mechs.

"Looks like we have some company, people! Get to cover and fire when ready!"

Garrus barked orders as he rushed over to the doorframe for cover, drawing his sniper rifle in the process. Tali readied her shotgun at the adjacent doorframe, but Six simply marched towards the enemy mechs, aiming his Mattock and firing several rounds perfectly in the optics of each unit. In the short time they had to return fire, the mechs barely flickered the shields on the Spartan's armor.

"Confirmed kills. Keep moving up; I've got point." Six didn't even skip a beat as he made his way around the corner, trailed closely by Garrus and Tali, who wasted no time following the exceptionally well-armored Spartan. In the next room, they found the Salarrians who had just been attacked by the mechs, all dead on the floor or slumped against the walls.

"Looks like we were too late to help themâ€¦" Tali added somberly as she knelt down to check the pulse on one. "I'm starting to think we should let this assassin do his job _before_ we talk to him."

"Maybe so Tali, but let's keep going. I've got tangos on my motion tracker. Stay behind me." Six moved through the next doorway, followed closely by Tali and then Garrus. Around another corner, Six spotted several mercenaries wearing yellow armor, and several more of

those mechs that he so easily dispatched. "Garrus, are those the Eclipse mercs Seryna wasâ€¦" As he was interrupted by a hail of gunfire, his shields flashed down to minimum, setting off numerous warning lights and sounds inside his helmet, and causing him to take cover behind the nearest pillar.

"Yea Six, that's probably why they're shooting at us!"

Both the Turian and the Spartan fired blindly around their cover, hoping to distract the enemies for a moment to regain their composure. Tali threw her arm out, activating her combat drone and sending it after the Asari captain leading them. "Go get her Chiktikka! Good girl!"

The combat drone was enough to distract the mercs assaulting their position, as they now were making their way down a single, narrow path towards them. "Garrus, Tali; cover me for a bit so I can slip around the back of them. And then we'll have them surrounded."

"Do it Six! That combat drone won't keep them busy for much longer! Tali and I have your back on this. GO!"

Tali and Garrus had barely begun to fire when Six bolted across the room, taking a few shots at his side before he made it to the parallel corridor. Through the doorway, he found two Eclipse mercs, each supposedly crafting the same idea as him. But they weren't ready for him to charge around the corner, and one of them jumped back in shock. The other, obviously more seasoned, immediately fired at him and managed to land a few shots on his shields before the Spartan fired multiple rounds into his abdomen. The next one, armed with a shotgun, had enough time to regain his composure to aim and fire a volley of pellets at Six, dropping his shields and peppering his still-shiny armor, creating several gouges across his chest. Six aimed again, firing a single round through the merc's helmet, dropping him instantly. "Textbook shooting!" Holstering his Mattock, the lieutenant drew his Eviscerator and ran up to the next doorway, behind the rest of the Eclipse group.

Peeking his head around the corner, he saw the Asari captain standing back, coordinating the attack on Garrus and Tali. "Keep firing you idiots! They can't hold out their forever! Send the mechs in first as bullet shields!" She then launched a biotic attack at the two, sending several of the crates they were using as cover flying into the air.

"Here goes nothingâ€¦" Six twirled around the doorway, remaining unseen by the Eclipse mercenaries, and more importantly, the captain. He sprinted to her, grabbed the Asari by her armor's collar and slammed her backwards into the ground. With her eyes gapping in shock as she now looked up at the Spartan, Six raised his arm while activating his energy dagger, and drove it deep through the right side of her chest plate, guessing her heart was in the same place as a human. She barely had time to raise an arm and call for help as her eyes went lifeless. Wasting no time on her, Six readied his shotgun and fired off two rounds, each killing a mercenary.

By now, the others had noticed him, and had all turned around to deal with the Spartan, leaving them completely exposed to Garrus and Tali, who immediately began to fire on the group. Six dove behind a crate in the middle of the room, and fired one more shot over his shoulder

before reloading. With the sounds of fewer guns firing behind him now, he turned again to face the mercs, shooting one down the unfinished elevator shaft of the room, and two more directly in the chest, dropping them almost instantly.

Tali and Garrus, now on the offensive as well, managed to destroy all the mechs that the mercenaries had activated, and now moved on the last group of mercenaries between them and Noble Six. Tali had drawn her pistol, rather than reload her shotgun, and fired multiple shots into each target, while Garrus dropped two Vanguard, each with a well-placed sniper round. The final mercenary, a young human woman, gave up and threw her arms in the air.

"I surrender! Please, just don't shoot me!"

All three stopped, lowering their weapons slowly in case she had a sidearm or hidden grenade.

"Please, just let me go! I'll tell you anything you want to know!"

"Relax human. We weren't even here to start trouble. Your friends are the ones that started shooting at us. Now tell us about Nassana. Where is she?" Garrus walked forward, speaking in a surprisingly calm and comforting voice.

"She's up in her tower. It's the next one over, Tower One. We're in Tower Two. She's got a lot of us there, too. She's really scared someone is coming after her. Is that what you're doing here?"

Garrus looked over at Six, who had walked up right behind the girl now, and just snickered a little. "No, but if you knew Nassan you wouldn't be upset about it one bit. But we are looking for someone; someone else that isn't supposed to be here either. Know anything about that?"

"Ummm well... I did hear Red and Silver teams chatting over the radio about some intruder. When you showed up, that's who I thought you were. But they said they were only looking for one person. So I guess he's still here somewhere. Both of those teams are up close to the top. The guy you're looking for is probably ahead of you, too."

The three looked around at each other, impressed the mercenary was so forthcoming with information. Obviously, she was a new addition to Eclipse.

"Sooo are you gonna let me go?" She could barely say the sentence through all the fear inside her, and played with her hands while waiting for an answer.

Garrus and Tali started mumbling to each other, giving Six a chance to walk behind her and firmly slap his hand on her shoulder. "Sure kid, why not. But I better not see you in an Eclipse uniform again. If I do well let's just say you won't be too happy. And I remember faces pretty well. You better find a job that doesn't involve killing innocent civilians."

"Yes sir! Of course! I'll I'll go to the employment office and

look for something as soon as tomorrow. Thank you so much!" The young girl sprinted away, leaving her gun and dead companions long forgotten.

"Six, what the hell are you thinking, letting her go like that? Do you really think that she'll do anything she said?" Garrus was frustrated with him, walking over and standing right in his face.

"Relax Garrus. Aren't you wondering why I put my arm on her? It wasn't just to be comfortingâ€|" The Turian, and now Tali, both shrugged. "I planted a tracking chip on her. We don't have time to deal with prisoners, and I'm guessing you don't just want to execute everyone to avoid the problem. We'll find Nassana, grab the assassin and then I'll drop the tracking codes off with the local police. Simple as that. Oh, and I actually do think she was telling the truth. At least about leaving Eclipse. Did you see how scared she was? I almost laughed while talking to her. Everyone deserves a second chance, Garrus."

While he was upset at Six, Garrus realized the Spartan was right about the merc. They were in a hurry, and if they could deal with her later, that made things a lot easier. "Fine Six, you win. But next time, just wait and tell me and Tali before you let someone go like that. Got it?"

"Got it, Garrus."

"Alright, let's keep moving. It sounds like we have a lot of Eclipse mercs to deal with before we reach Nassana."

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Author's Note:

Well there's another chapter done. I'm probably going to start writing them a thousand words or so shorter, just so I can update more often. Let me know if that's a good decision or not.

Obviously, the next chapter will be the continuation of Thane's recruitment, and I'm planning on telling it a little differently from the game. Just to mix things up a bit.

Suggestions are always welcome, and as always, thanks for reading!

9. Assassins

"Dammit Serayna! I'm paying you an entire year's worth of credits for a few weeks of security and guard service! How the hell can a single team of infiltrators get past an entire company of your Eclipse mercs!" Nassana had been screaming at the mercenary commander for the past 30 minutes, unable to calm down since the mysterious team consisting of a Turian, Quarian, and Human had infiltrated her towers and started eliminating her security. "There's only three of them! I hired you because you said you were the best!"

The Asari commander, seasoned and disciplined, appeared calm and held her composure in the face of her angry client. "Obviously we've underestimated this team's abilities, Miss Dantius. But I assure you, my troops will hold their ground and will kill these commandos. I was hired to keep you safe, and that's exactly what I'll do for you. So don't waste your time yelling at me." The Eclipse commander turned around from Nassana, trying to end their conversation in the penthouse of Tower One.

"Oh, well I guess I was just worried then. They've only killed three of your teams! Silly me! And what about that assassin I've been hearing radio chatter about? What are you doing to find him?"

"Miss Dantius, I need to be able to calmly communicate with my troops to ensure your safety. So please, respect my wish when I ask you to shut the hell up!" Serayna then walked out of Nassana's office, two of her personal guards following closely behind. "I want to know everything about these commandos. Why are they here, what are their capabilities, what sort of weapons are they utilizing?"

"Yes ma'am! Right away!" Both of her escorts sprinted ahead of her, probably to initiate communications between surviving team leaders. While Nassana thought that three teams had fallen victim to these infiltrators, they had actually just massacred number five. They clearly were completely capable of anything Eclipse threw at them, and they were only minutes from reaching the top of Tower Two. And from there, they were only a short walk from reaching Nassana's penthouse. If things didn't turn around, the commander may very well have to evacuate an increasingly angry client to a safer location.

Serayna walked over to one of the security monitor stations she had installed in the lobby of Nassana's penthouse, linked to the hundreds of cameras and sensors installed over the past few weeks. She flipped through all the recent feed, watching the enemy team make their way through her units as if they were Blue Suns recruits. While she had mentioned nothing to Nassana, the commander had run DNA scans on the team, and easily found that the Turian and Quarian were none other than Garrus Vakarian and Tali'Zorah, two of Commander Shepard's team that took down Saren. She wasn't surprised to see them here: Nassana had disclosed their complicated history to Eclipse, as to notify Eclipse of any potential threats. The Quarian and Turian were both commonly known as idealists, fighting corruption and evil out of principal.

While they were both proven to be extremely deadly combatants, even the two together should've been no match for an entire company of veteran mercenaries. The commander then turned her attention to the third party member, the one that greatly intrigued her. Numerous DNA and bio scans by local security measures produced literally no data, not even with her access to the Illium Intelligence Service. Watching the video feed, it was clear to Serayna that this human, this one human, was the one truly responsible for the deaths of dozens of her troops. He charged directly into opposition, seeming invincible in the face of death. The sight of him assassinating the captain of Green Team in the opening firefight, sent a chill down her spine.

'_Who the hell are you?_'

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"Noble Six, move up and hit the mercenaries head on! Tali, move to the right behind those pillars and focus on distracting them. I'm going to pick them off from back here with my sniper rifle. Go on my mark. Threeâ€| twoâ€| oneâ€| MARK!" Garrus barked orders as he sprinted back several yards, sliding around a pile of sheet rock and taking aim with his rifle. Six rushed forward, firing heavily into the newest team of Eclipse mercenaries foolish enough to stand in their way. Tali reached her target and immediately activated her combat drone, and started hacking enemy systems.

Six, armed again with his Mattock, peaked around his cover and started firing at the Eclipse Vanguard he was now becoming extremely familiar with. They hadn't wounded him yet, but their constant close-quarters attacks were certainly testing the Spartan's skills; and shields. His new Mk. VII armor was getting a complete field test with today's combat, already saving his ass several times.

'_Dammit! These Asari could almost team up on a Jiralhanae and win! '_

Grabbing one of his new grenades, Six lobbed it perfectly to hit one of them directly in the abdomen, exploding around the two Vanguards only a moment later. Killing one of them, the other was wounded and stunned enough to give Six a clean shot at her, dropping her to the ground.

"That one's free of charge!"

He loaded a new thermal clip, turning around the other side of his cover to fire at the enemies, creating enough of a distraction for Garrus to pick them off. His first target, a Salarian brave enough to make his way towards them, was rewarded with a golf ball sized hole in his head. Rather than flee in terror like a group of Unggoy, the mercs held their ground and fought even fiercer. Several of the mercs even moved closer to the team, hoping they could catch them off balance. Tali, going relatively unnoticed as she was focusing on hacking, was given the perfect chance to flank several exposed mercenaries and immediately began firing with her shotgun, catching several in crossfire.

While Tali was too far away to drop their kinetic barriers, Six and Garrus both had golden opportunities to begin picking the enemies off again, killing several with well-placed shots in their abdomens and helmets. At the sight of several more of their comrades being killed, the remaining mercs began to fall back, but still held enough composure to keep the three from charging them. One of the remaining Vanguards seemed unfazed by her friends dying around her, as she biotically charged straight into the Spartan, knocking him to the ground and disarming him. Even the advanced shields on his armor couldn't withstand that punishment, causing them to overload and flicker violently.

"That's right you bastard! Now die!" the Asari screamed.

The Asari lowered her shotgun to aim directly at Six, who was just

now realizing what had happened to him. He looked the Vanguard in the eye, and realized he didn't have enough time to reach for his sidearm. He could only use the last seconds of his life to think one more time about something.

'_I'll see you soon, Noble Team.' _

Just as Six waited for his release, he was instead greeted by the angry Asari falling on him, limp and bleeding from multiple wounds. Snapping back to focus, he threw the dead girl off him and was thrilled to see Tali, standing behind where the Vanguard was just moments ago. She pumped her shotgun, expelling a thermal clip from its chamber, and offered a hand to the stunned Spartan.

"I was just beginning to think that nothing could kill you, Six. Looks like I still need to keep an eye on you after all." Six could barely see through the Quarian's visor, but he swore he could see a soft smile behind the purple glass.

Their moment of relief was immediately broken, both directing their attention to the few Eclipse troops still firing at them in the room. Both fired their weapons, picking away at the shields of the enemies while Garrus still dropped them from his sniper perch. Each time Tali and Six injured a merc, they were awarded by the swift sound of a single sniper round whizzing past them, sending a mercenary to the ground each time.

By now, only two of the Eclipse troopers remained, both determined to fight to their deaths. They retreated around the next corner, attempting to lure the three teammates into a trap they wouldn't have time to set. Noble Six charged forward, turning the corner and immediately firing at the two mercs who were still running. Both weakened from the continuous fight already, they were taken down quickly and painlessly, the most the Spartan could offer them. Six turned around to wave at his companions.

"Hostiles neutralized. We should check the area to see if we can find any more workers who might still be alive. My motion tracker has neutral targets in the side room up ahead."

"Roger that, Six. Tali, see if you can get that locked door open. We'll keep you covered." Garrus gently pushed Tali towards the room, sending her on her way.

Tali started typing away vigorously at the controls, bypassing the multiple security systems that Nassana had installed in her towers. Six and Garrus backed up in front of her, keeping their eyes open for any more mercs that may be in the area.

"You've been doing one hell of a job, Six. Looks like you've gotten used to our weapons already. How are you holding up?" Garrus was, of course, referring mostly to Six's very recent run-in with Death. Had Tali not been so close to him, the Vanguard would have pulled the trigger and sent the Spartan packing.

"I'll be fine, Garrus. I've had more than my fair share of close calls. But thanks for askingâ€¦ We've got a job to do right now. That's what we should be focusing on."

"Speaking of that too, Six. When we were on the Citadel and the

Normandy, you were very laid back. I almost wouldn't think of you as a soldier. But throughout this mission, you've been very strict with yourself. Is there a problem?"

"No, Garrusâ€¦ I guess it just comes with being a Spartan. I've spent my whole life a soldier, and as soon as the bullets start flying, it's all business for me. Simple as that. I don't want any of my teammates hurt because I was too busy laughing with them. We can talk about it after the mission is done. We have an assassin to find."

Garrus was more amused than surprised by Six, snickering a bit to himself. Quietly, of course, just in case the Spartan could hear him laughing. "Alright Six, we'll keep this one for another time. Tali, have you gotten the door open yet?"

Tali was still fiddling with the controls, going at speeds only an AI would be able to match. "Because we are still standing here, Garrus, I'm sure you can see that the door isn't open" she said with a bit of frustration, conveying her annoyance with the security systems. Obviously, Nassana wasn't messing around when she installed the software on her towers. "Sorry, Garrus. Just give me another few secondsâ€¦ there! That should do it!"

The door flew wide open, revealing several Salarians more or less cowering in the corner of the storage closet. A dead Eclipse mercenary was also on the floor, his sidearm now in the hand of one of the workers. Raising the pistol at the newcomers, he immediately began to frighteningly yell demands.

"Stay back, you! We don't want you Eclipse to hurt us anymore! I said **stay back**_!" The Salarian could barely speak over his terror, but to his credit, he stood his ground and held the gun at them. Six, more specifically. "Go away! Just let us hide here, we don't want to die!"

Noble Six had already realized the Salarian was out of place, completely unfamiliar with the situation he was now in. The Spartan approached him, calm and slowly, and held his hand out. "Hey, we aren't with Eclipse. None of us wants to hurt you. Please, give me the gun, and we'll keep you safe."

The Salarian considered his offer for a moment, and then quickly rejected it out of fear. "No! You'reâ€¦ you're just trying to trick us! I'm not falling for it, and you can just leave!"

"Hey, I know this isn't easy. But just think about it: we could've thrown some grenades in here, and killed you without trouble. Why do you think I'm trying to talk to you now? Just put the gun down, and let's talk."

The Salarian now spent more time pondering Six's statements, seemingly taking them to heart. He slowly lowered the gun, eventually dropping it to the ground. "Iâ€¦ I don't feel too goodâ€¦" He fell to the floor, being partially caught by Six, keeping his head from slamming harshly.

One of the other Salarians in the room, who had been the calmest of the group, jumped forward as soon as the one with the gun fell into Six's arms. "Telon! What happened?" He crouched down, checking what

appeared to Six as a pulse for a Salarian, placing a finger on Telon's forehead. "His name is Telon, and he's my brother. I just want to make sure that he's alright. I know you didn't hurt him but, he isn't the toughest person I knowâ€¦"

Six crouched down to be at eye level with the other Salarian, while also taking the gun nonchalantly and handing it back for Tali to take. "Maybe not, but he is very brave for what he did. I could have easily been one of the Eclipse mercs, and they would probably have just gunned him down. Maybe he's foolish for not surrendering, but he tried to protect you and your friends" said Six. The firefight with Eclipse on the side now, he was able to let his emotions run freely once again. And while he never truly understood civilians, he tried to appreciate them. He spent his whole life fighting for them. This Salarian named Telon was clearly someone willing to give his life up against insurmountable odds. Even if he fainted like a girlâ€¦

Both Six and the Salarian now stood up, the latter seemingly happy that his brother Telon was going to be just fine. "He'll be just fine. I think he'll wake up in a few minutes. Are you three the ones that shot that mercenary" the Salarian said, as he pointed to the dead Human next to them.

"I don't think we got that one. It looks like he's been here for a while, and we just got to this level" said Garrus. "He has a sniper wound in his head, and I know I didn't shoot anyone that was already in this room. Did either of you?" He looked at Six and Tali, both shaking their heads. "Maybe the assassin came by here. Can you tell us what happened?"

"Yea, heâ€¦ he found us in here a while ago; we were hiding from the rest of the mercenaries when we heard the gunshots. He started yelling at us, but we were all too scared to do anything. None of us moved, and he yelled some more, threatening to kill us. Just as he raised his gun hisâ€¦ his head just exploded! We haven't seen anything like it before. But, I guess we wouldn't really know anything about fighting" the Salarian said.

"Interestingâ€¦ a perfect head shot from a tough angle, and no collateral damage. Why do you think he'd risk exposing himself to help these workers?" Garrus was very puzzled, clearly unable to consider that the assassin may actually want to help someone.

"Maybe he was looking out for them, Garrus. I think there might be more to this assassin than you're willing to admit. Either way, we should probably keep moving. More mercs are bound to come the area looking for us."

"Yea Six, you're right. Salarian, do you think you could lead your friends down to the lower levels? By now the police are on their way, and we've made sure the floors below us are safe."

"Yea, yea we should be able to do that" he said as he nervously played with his hands. He reached down to Telon, who was now conscious again and beginning to sit up. "Come on, Telon. Let's get out of here everyone!"

The Salarians left the room, in a hurry as to avoid any more Eclipse troopers that could be coming to the area in search of their missing teams. Tali and Garrus turned as well, leaving the room and started

walking towards the staircase nearby. Six however, was stopped by a voice in his head. Well, sort of in his head.

"Six, wait a second! Do you see that data pad on the ground, next to the merc?" Six nodded, reaching down to grab it and start scanning it for Leliana. "It's full of bank account information. This merc must have been one of the officers here; he has all the access codes for every account listed! And it has holdings for multiple Eclipse outfits across the city."

"So what are you telling me, Leliana? Are you saying you can rob them?"

"Not just that, Six. Those accounts from other Eclipse groups? They seem to work one wayâ€¦ They deposit credits for this guy to access, but they don't have any way to use them once they deposit their funds. That means as long as they don't notice, we have free credits! And the deposits are weekly, and very, very generous. I suspect we can use these accounts for almost anything we'll need for repairs on your armor. And anything for the cabin. We'll be comfortable for a long time with what is already in the accounts, even without new deposits."

"Leliana, have I ever told you that you're the greatest AI I know?"

"Is that the best you can do, Six" she said playfully. "Impress me, Spartan."

"Ughâ€¦ alright. Leliana, you're the greatest AI I can _ever hope to know_, and you'll always be smarter than me. Are you happy now?"

"He he he. Yes I am Six. Now hurry up and catch Garrus and Tali. You'll have to stay on their good sides so they help us spend some of these credits."

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"Noble Six, move up to the elevator. We've got you covered" Garrus said, issuing orders to the Spartan after their most recent run-in with Eclipse. The firefight they just finished was easier than those from earlier; the mercenaries seemed to know that they were losing during each engagement, and each new group the three encountered appeared more intimidated than the last. And that was just fine with the Spartan.

"Roger that, I've got the door. Stay alert until the elevator gets to us." The Spartan made his way to the elevator controls, punching the call button. The always alert soldier noticed his motion tracker signal hostiles in the elevator, alerting him to the incoming danger. "I've got tangos in the elevator! Everyone get to some cover fast!" But he was too late. Garrus was close enough to cover to dive for it, but Six and Tali were left exposed when a very angry looking Krogan and two Human Vanguard appeared when the elevator doors opened.

Wasting no time to protect his squad mate, Noble Six dove straight for the Krogan, whose shot originally meant for Tali was deflected at

the ceiling, while the the two Vanguards ignored him to focus their attention on Tali and Garrus, splitting up to each take on a target. While Tali was given the time to fire a few cover shots at the Human chasing her, Noble Six was left alone to deal with a very upset Krogan.

Still holding the edge over the surprised Krogan, Six raised his arm to ready for a hit, aiming right at the Krogan's face. Bringing down his hand, he expected nothing different than any other time he hit an enemy: blood and broken bones. No alien had ever, _not even a Jiralhanae_, proven strong enough to withstand a direct hit from a Spartan. Six was almost dumbstruck when his hand stopped almost instantly on the Krogan's nose, barely drawing blood from it.

"Awwwww crapâ€¦"

Nothing short of pissed off, the Krogan grabbed Six by his shoulder armor and threw him to the side, smashing him into the wall of the elevator, sending his rifle flying away. He even made a dent in the metal. Standing up, the Krogan roared in anger and drew a knife from a sheath on its shoulder. Six stood up, dazed by the hit but aware enough to see the Krogan wanted to fight him honorably. Or, that's what Six assumed. Rather than reach for his sidearm, which would give the Krogan enough time to charge him, he drew the kukri he had on his leg, and waited for the Krogan to make a move.

The oversized toad charged him, attempting to pin him against the wall. Six rolled out of the way, swiping at the Krogan's leg as it rushed passed him. With the mercenary now wounded, Six made an attack of his own as he ran at the beast, stabbing it multiple times in its hump. And while the Krogan was gushing blood from the wounds, Six was unsurprised when it spun around and swung its own knife at the Spartan, stabbing him directly in his left shoulder. His shields flickered and overloaded almost instantly as Six felt the sensation of cold metal seep into his skin. Flinching in pain, he used the adrenaline now flowing freely through his body to quickly head butt the Krogan, giving him the chance to rip the knife from his shoulder. Rather than turn the blade on its former owner and risk losing it, Six quickly bent it and threw it off to the side, leaving the Krogan at a disadvantage.

Now being more careful than to simply charge each other, the Krogan and Six paced a circle with each other, waiting for one to strike first. Patience is a virtue Spartans have, while Krogans do not, and the merc ran once again at Six. Acting surprised by this, Six stood his ground and let his attacker slam him into the wall freely, knocking the wind from him. The Krogan smiled in Six's face, but that quickly turned to surprise. Looking down at his chest, the Krogan noticed that Six had let him use his own force to impale himself on the knife. Twisting it to torture the merc for a moment, Six then ripped the knife from the attacker once more and drove it deep into the enemy's neck, stunning him completely and causing Six to be dropped on the floor.

While Noble Six struggled on all fours for a moment to catch his breath, the Krogan stumbled for a few moments, collapsing on its side once too much of his own blood poured from his neck and other wounds. The victorious Spartan stood up and walked over to his victim, taking the knife away to allow it to bleed quicker. The Krogan growled

slowly for a few more seconds, staring off into space as the world went dark to him. Six was not without his own wounds, however. He looked to his shoulder, seeing the blood dripping onto the floor, and he felt bruises forming all over his body. But he won, doing what most humans could never hope to: kill a Krogan in hand-to-hand combat.

The Spartan sheathed his knife, and remembering the others, quickly turned around while drawing his shotgun only to see that Tali and Garrus were both watching him, the other Eclipse troopers dead behind them.

"How long have you two been watching me get my ass kicked by that thing?"

"Well, how long until you'd be angry?" asked Tali. Six started to point fingers before she interrupted him. "I'm kidding, Six. We both just finished up with those other two mercs. It didn't look like we would be able to actually help more than get in the way, so we were waiting. You know, maybe we could get a clear shot on itâ€¦"

"Yea, I'm sure you both were standing with your guns raised, ready to fire. I'm fine, by the way. Thanks for asking you two."

"Oh Six! I didn't see the wound on your arm!" Tali exclaimed as she ran to Six's side. "Let me take a look at that wound. Yes Six, _I do need to see it_." She became a bit snappy after the Spartan tried hiding his shoulder from her, unsuccessfully. "The wound doesn't seem too deep. How does it feel?"

"Like I got stabbed in the arm by a Mgalekâ€¦ I mean Krogan. It hurts, but I'll be just fine once we get back to the Normandy. Don't worry about me Tali."

"You sound just like Shepard and Garrus whenever they get hurt. I swear Garrus, if you could have still talked after that rocket wound on Omega you'd have begged for your rifle!" She looked over at the Turian, who could only answer by rubbing his neck and some incoherent mumbling. "You aren't going anywhere until I fix that wound, Six. And no arguing!"

Tali forcefully pushed Six on the ground, keeping him occupied with one arm while she reached into her pockets to find a small canister. It reminded Six a lot of the bio-foam cans the UNSC used, but those were as large as a 2 liter of soda. The canister Tali held was no bigger than the bullet of an SRS99. She pooped the cap on top of it, and squeezed the goo onto Noble Six's shoulder. It stung for just a few moments, and then the sedatives began to sooth the knife wound he had received just minutes ago.

"There you go, Six. How does it feel?"

"Betterâ€¦ a lot better, actually. Thanks Tali." He smiled a little behind his visor, happy to be with teammates that cared about him.

"Good to hear. Maybe next time you won't argue with me so much, hmm?" She giggled a little, and then turned around to face Garrus. "What should we do know, Garrus?"

"Let's take the elevator up to the top floor; that's where the catwalk is to the next tower. We need to make our way over there before Krios can get a chance to kill Nassana and get away. I'll take point for now. Let's go."

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"Six, take out those rocket turrets! We aren't going anywhere until their gone!" Garrus barked orders out as he was busy sniping enemy mercs, frantically popping in and out of cover as rocket's whizzed over his head. He could barely peek out of his cover to locate a target before he heard the turrets fire at him.

"Got it Garrus! Tali, give me some cover while I make a run for the staircase below them!"

Six started running towards the staircase while Tali was still aiming his shotgun, hoping to distract the mercs enough that Tali would be hit with any unnecessary fire. He sprinted to the first stack of crates, slamming into them to stop. A rocket impacted just behind him, sending rubble over his cover and bouncing off his helmet.

"Hey, this helmet wasn't cheap assholes!"

He pulled a grenade off his belt, priming it for a few moments and then tossing it over his shoulder without much aim, hoping to at least cause some of the Eclipse mercs to dive for cover. As soon as it detonated, he again ran down the catwalk, taking a limited amount of fire from a few of the mercs still aiming at him. Between his grenade and the constant fire from Tali, he had been lucky so far to avoid too much fire for his shields.

Reaching the last spot of cover before the staircase to the rocket turrets, the mercenary fire on Six's position had greatly intensified. Dozens of enemy rounds were chipping off the ground and cover around the Spartan, filling the air with small clouds of dust. The benefit of being so close now, however, was that the turrets wouldn't fire rockets so close to friendlies. And this gave Six the chance he needed.

Activating his radio, Six looked back at Tali and Garrus for help. "Garrus, Tali; give me a little more cover as soon as you can. I'll take the rocket drones out once I can get a shot in without too much damage!"

"Roger that, Six. Stand by so we can get a good angle on them" replied Garrus.

Replacing his Mattock onto his shoulder, Six removed the Arc Projector from its magnetic holster and waited for the mercenary fire on his position to cease. A few moments later, Garrus and Tali both began laying down heavy fire on the enemy positions, causing them to fall behind their cover. Six swung around his cover, charging the Arc Projector as he spun. As soon as he had a clear shot at the turrets, he fired the overcharged electrical bolt at his enemies. The ionized targets flickered and shook as they short-circuited, dropping down towards Six and exploding on impact with the ground.

Unfortunately for the Spartan, several of the mercs had moved to avoid his squad mates' cover fire, getting a now unobstructed shot at him. While switching back to his assault rifle, a mercenary sniper was able to get a shot off, shattering through the Spartan's shields and creating quite the impact dent on his chest plate. He ran back to his former position, now not needing to worry about rockets sending him falling to his death from the catwalk.

'_Dammit, I need to be more careful than thatâ€|'_

"Six, hold on a second: I detected several explosives crates on the left side of that balcony the turrets were. If you can throw a grenade onto that position, I think you will set the crates off. It might be enough to send the mercs flying off the ledge." Leliana highlighted the position on his HUD, giving him a clear view of what he needed to attack.

"Alright, here goes nothingâ€|"

He took the last grenade from his clip, and lobbed it as perfectly as he could, watching it bounce on the railing to the balcony. Just a few moments later, he was rewarded with a very large explosion that shook the walkway he was on. He watched in satisfaction as most of the mercs were consumed in the blast, with a few others being knocked off the ledge and down the stairs, allowing him to pick them off with his rifle. The few remaining mercs staggered and stumbled as they stood up, becoming easy prey for Garrus, who seemed unfazed by the explosion as he still fired on the enemies.

"Looks like we're clear" Garrus chimed in over the radio. "Move up to the door to the penthouse Six; we'll catch up in just a minute."

Six stood up, looking back across the walkway to see Tali and Garrus checking the area for some loose thermal clips while making their way to him. He walked up the staircase, grabbing some ammunition for himself along the way. Once he got to the doorway, he looked around at the mercenaries that now littered the area, seeing that none of them were moving. There were a lot of Salarians and Asari; he assumed the best squads were here to guard Nassana. But several Human bodies still laid dead, something that still made the Spartan a little uncomfortable. It reminded him too much of Reach, and the rest of the war.

"Six, are you all set to go?" asked Garrus as he and Tali came around the corner from the staircase.

"Affirmative; I was just checking to see if any of the mercs were still alive. Looks like we finished the job."

"Good, because we need to hurry up and get to Nassana. I want to talk to her before the assassin gets his shot in."

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"Garrus Vakarian? Tali'Zorah? What the hell are you two doing here?"

"We're just here to talk, Nassana. We aren't here to kill you" replied the Turian, who was standing between Six and Tali, who each had their pistols raised at the few mercenaries still protecting Nassana.

"Hah! Do you really expect me to believe that? Did Shepard send you? I heard he was still alive. Are you finishing what you started with my sister two years ago?"

"You really are one paranoid Asari, aren't you? We're just looking for someone."

"So is that why you broke into my towers? Killed my entire security force? Just to talk to someone?"

"They fired at us as soon as we landed! Don't expect us to have any sympathy for you!" proclaimed Tali, standing forward to accentuate her anger.

"What the hell did you expect for breaking into my tower? A warm welcome and a visit with me? You Quarrians are nothing but beggars and peasants!" Nassana snapped back. "I wouldn't hesitate for a second to kill you both! And that goes for your friend, too!"

Six had been standing quietly on the side, observing the Asari and watching the mercenary guards for any signs of movement. But Nassana had given him reason to talk now. "Save the pathetic insults for someone else, Asari. Since you know we already destroyed your entire security detail, I don't think you want to piss us off when you only have four guards left."

"Well aren't you just typical forâ€¦ WHAT!" Nassana was cut off as the Asari guard next to her started flinching and looking around.

"I thought I heard something" she answered.

"Dammit, check the other entrances into the room" Nassana commanded. "You three, stay right where you are."

Just when the mercs started to move to the doorways, Noble Six saw someone drop behind them almost completely silently. Only his enhanced hearing and his armor's audio sensors allowed him to hear the figure. He had no idea what a Drell was, but Six was certain this was the assassin. He effortlessly snuck up to the first merc, snapping his neck in an instant.

With the mercenaries and Nassana distracted by Thane, Six aimed his pistol at the Asari Eclipse and shot several rounds into her, ensuring her immediate demise. Thane fired quickly into the last merc, all while grabbing Nassana and spinning her around to face him. She was in too much shock to offer any resistance to Thane while he pressed his pistol to her stomachâ€¦

The gun fired, sending the precision mass effect round through her and impacted on the ceiling, driving into its metal. A small exit wound on Nassana started bleeding, running onto the floor, creating a pool of purple blood on the floor. Nassana struggled hopelessly, mumbling quietly as Thane placed her on her desk gently, crossing her arms as he let her go. He stood silently, folding his hands together as he appeared to start praying.

Garrus, Tali, and Six only stared at each other, wondering who should be the one to try and talk to the silent Drell. Did he even care the three were armed, and still in the room?

Six decided Garrus had spent enough time talking today, walking a few steps closer to Thane before speaking. "Do you really think that she's worth a prayer?"

"My prayers are not for her, Human. They are for me" Thane answered in a rather hoarse voice. He looked up at Six, his black eyes seemingly emotionless to the Spartan. "The measure of an individual can be very difficult to measure by actions alone, Human. Take the three of you, for example. All of this destruction, violence— death. I was very curious to see how much you would go through to find me. Well, here I am."

"You were expecting us? How did you know we were coming?" asked Garrus.

"I didn't know at all. Not until the three of you barged in the front door and started shooting. Nassana has become exceptionally paranoid over the past few weeks. I'm sure you noticed the strength of her security force. It was much more of a private army. She believed that one of her sisters would attempt to assassinate her. The three of you were a welcome distraction for me."

"So you used us?" Garrus asked, slightly angrily.

"I needed a distraction to get to Nassana. You wanted to speak with me. You've helped me reach her, and now I offer my attention to you in exchange. What did you wish to speak of with me?"

"Have you ever heard of a race called the Collectors?" Garrus asked.

"By reputation."

"They're abducting entire Human colonies in the Terminus Systems. Freedom's Progress and Horizon were their work. We're here recruiting you for Commander Shepard. We're going to stop them" answered Garrus.

"I see. I know who you and Miss Zorah are, Mr. Vakarian." Thane answered as he turned to face Garrus. "Attacking the Collectors homeworld would require us to travel through the Omega-4 Relay. If I remember right, no ship has ever returned from a trip through the relay."

"People also told Shepard that it was impossible to get to Ilos. We sure showed them."

"That is a fair point. You've helped Commander Shepard build a career of completing the impossible. This was to be my last job; I'm dying. Low survival odds are not a concern to me. The abduction of Human colonists does."

"I take that as a yes to join the team?" asked Garrus.

"Yes, Garrus, it does. But if you would first introduce yourself—"

Thane turned to Noble Six, but before the Spartan had a chance to introduce himself, they were interrupted by the sound of doors opening, and a particular Asari sprinting into the room.

"Hands where I can see them! All of you!" Eclipse commander Serayna yelled at them as she grabbed Tali from behind, pointing a pistol right at her head. "Make one move and you can all see what the inside of a Quarian looks like!"

Garrus, Six, and Thane all held their ground for a few moments, aiming their weapons at the Eclipse commander's head. They could easily take a clean shot, but if they weren't able to drop the Asari quicklyâ€¦

"Everyone do what she says. We'll have to talk this out" ordered Garrus, who remained surprisingly calm around the mercenary who was essentially a criminal. "Look, you better not go and hurt her. Do you really think we'll let you go if you pull that trigger?"

"What are you three doing? Shoot her! Don't worry about me!" screamed Tali as she wrestled with the Asari.

Serayna tightened her grip on Tali's neck, pulling her back and down enough to grab her attention and stop her struggling. "Stop fighting with me or I pull this trigger! Now as for the three of you: get me a ride out of here and I won't pull this trigger on your little friend. And don't even try anything heroic or she gets it!"

"It's fineâ€¦ just take it easy. Don't hurt Tali if you want that shuttle" answered Garrus. Garrus activated his radio link to the Normandy then. "Normandy? We need a Kodiak at our location immediately. No questions asked."

"No! Don't give her anything for me! Justâ€¦" Tali was cut off as Serayna hit her over the back of the head with her pistol, knocking Tali to the ground. She fell, dazed by the hit, and barely had time to turn over and see the mercenary aiming her pistol right into her helmet.

"You should've listened to me the first time, Quarian, Enjoy the holeâ€¦ UGH!" Serayna was tackled to the ground in a blur of grey steel, slamming into the wall behind where she was just standing. She coughed purple blood onto the floor, unable to move as she was still pinned by whatever just tackled her. She looked up, through blurred vision and blood seeping from behind her eyes, to see a golden visor looking directly at her. He pressed her against the wall harder, cracking several bones across her torso as he ensured she wouldn't escape, causing the Asari to scream in agony.

With his free hand, Noble Six reached to his helmet and removed it, looking Serayna right in her eyes. She was still focused enough to see a look of pure revulsion over his face. "That just cost you your life, Asari." Six raised his right arm, activated his energy dagger, and drove it right into Serayna's heart. He watched with anger as she slowly stopped breathing.

Panting heavily from the adrenaline screaming through his body, Six stood up and remained looking at the Asari for several moments before he was able to regain his composure, turning around to see Garrus and Thane crouching over Tali. "Is she ok? Did the Asari hurt her at

all?"

Garrus was scanning Tali with his Omni-tool, waiting a few seconds before he answered Six. "She's just fine, Six; she just got knocked out. She'll probably have a headache when she wakes up, but that'll be it. Butâ€¦ what happened to you?" Garrus looked at Six, without his helmet for the first time, to see that the look of anger had been replaced with distress. "I'm glad you saved Tali, but that was intense Six."

"Iâ€¦ I don't really know what happened. I just don't want any of my teammates to get hurt, that's all."

"That was more than professional concern, Human" chimed Thane. "I can see you treat these two as more than squad mates."

Six just looked over at Thane, unable to form any real answer as he was still calming himself down. "Yea, Iâ€¦ they're both the only friends I have now. It's a long story Thane, and there are still a lot of people in line to hear it."

"Fair enough, Human. For now, may I call you Six? That is what Garrus calls you, is it not?"

"That will be just fine, Thane. Thanks for asking." Six managed a weak smile as he reach over and picked his helmet up, placing it back on his head. "Garrus, can we carry Tali out to the landing pad? That dropship should be here any second."

"Yea, she's just fine Six. Don't worry. Give me a hand picking her up, and we'll go wait outside. You can take her to the med bay yourself when we get back."

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It had been over three hours since they recruited Thane, and Dr. Chakwas had finally kicked Noble Six out of the med bay to get some sleep. The only reason he was even allowed that long was so he could be treated for his own wounds, the knife wound being the only real trouble. But still, as everyone knows, Chakwas won't let a soldier go without a full treatment, despite their usual protests. Six's shoulder was still burning from the medi-gel, clearly a stronger type than Tali's field cleaning, as he made his way into his observation cabin.

The first thing he did was lock the door, and then slowly walked over to the table in the center of the room, removing Leliana's chip and placing it so she could appear and look around. As soon as Six was looking at her, she already had a look of both sadness and concern all over her.

"You know I'm going to make you talk about it, right?"

Taking his helmet off and dropping it on the floor, Six walked over to the desk in the corner, opening a drawer and pulling out the bottle of scotch he bought on the Citadel. He took the cork and cap off quickly, almost starting to drink straight from the bottle. He managed to control himself, and reached for one of the glasses

Gardner had given him, pouring enough to fill the low-ball to the top. He took a few gulps and refilled the glass before he turned back to Leliana. "Yea, I know. I just wanted to be ready for it" he dryly chuckled as he walked over and sat down with his AI friend. "Go ahead, tell me what I did wrong."

"Don't think it's something like that, Six" She answered quietly. "You know why you snapped like that. It wasn't just because Tali is was in danger. If Garrus had been the one, you'd have jumped at that merc just as fast, too."

"I'd do it for anyone I was fighting with, Leliana. She was in trouble andâ€¦"

"You may have fooled most of the people back in ONI that you don't get emotionally attached, Six, but don't bother trying with me. She's more than just another marine in trouble. Garrus and Tali are our team, now. And you don't want anything to happen to them. You're worried about failing them."

Six turned sharply at Leliana, clearly upset by what she just said. He could see the concern still in her eyes, but she was now resolved to give him a lecture. And he knew it was coming. Realizing that he would hear it eventually anyways, the Spartan bit his tongue, quite literally, and waited for the whole speech.

"Six, I've told you before, and I obviously need to tell you again; what happened on Reachâ€¦ you're the best Spartan the UNSC ever madeâ€¦ even as lethal as 117. You couldn't have changed it. They all gave their lives for Humanity, willingly. You couldn't have changed so much that they all would still be alive."

Six just sat on the couch, listening as the memories and emotions flooded through him. The thought of all his friends, all still on Reach, was something he knew would stick him for the rest of his life. Truth be told, Six knew that most of them were out of his hands. It was just one of their death's that he couldn't get over.

"I could've changed it for oneâ€¦" he mumbled, ensuring Leliana wouldn't hear him.

"What was that, Six?" she asked.

"Nothing. I justâ€¦ I know you're right. It's just going to be hard for a while." He took another gulp from the scotch, barely able to hold back the tears in his eyes now.

Leliana smiled a little, happy that her incessant demands and lectures had finally cracked the stubborn Spartan. They still had a lot to work on, but it was a start. "Keeping yourself from drinking a bottle of scotch every week wouldn't hurt either, Six."

"Oh no, you had your big win for the night, Leliana. You can try and convince me to stop this another time. I'm gonna need it to get some good sleep through this medi-gel Chakwas stuck in my arm. It hurts almost as much as the knife did."

"Well you kind of had it coming when you picked a fight with a Krogan."

"Very funny, Leliana. Well it was that or let Garrus deal with it. I think he's pretty good, but I'm not willing to bet he can win a fist fight with one of those overgrown toads. He seems to like using his sniper rifle more than anything else. I can deal with the dirty work if that's how he wants it."

"Speaking of that, we'll need to talk to Jacob in the morning about repairs for your armor. When I was in the lab with Mordin, I noticed they keep all the same types of materials on board. They use them for other things, but Jacob should be able to make any repairs we'll ever need here on the ship."

"I'm glad you noticed. I was wondering what we were going to do if we had to fight in any vacuum." Six looked down at his shoulder, ignoring the medi-gel and wound to examine the armor damage. Nothing serious, but enough to warrant a unique repair. "We'll talk about it tomorrow, Leliana. I'm gonna get some sleep. Wake me up when you feel like it."

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Author's Note:

There we go, another chapter down. Hopefully everyone likes it, and as usual, please add reviews or message me if you have suggestions.

I'm hoping everyone likes the development of Six. I want him to be funny and laid back most of the time, but as you can see, even he still has problems. His reaction to Tali being hurt, and later any friend, is going to be one of the most important parts of the story.

As a request to all my readers, I have a question: with Mass Effect 3 coming soon, I would like to know if people would rather me finish this story detailing ME2, and risk delaying Regret and Forgiveness for ME3, or skip large portions of ME2 to be able to get to ME3 within a few months of its release on March 6th. If I were to choose the latter, I would still thoroughly develop Six and Tali's relationship first; I would simply skip most of the missions and other parts of the story. Let me know what you all think.

Thanks!

10. Reach

REACH

**SHIPBREAKING YARDS OF ASZOD **

AUGUST 30***TH*****, 2552**

20:00 HOURS

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Noble Six had spent the past hour walking around the outpost, honoring each of the dead marines he found in the area. Each one had given his life for Humanity; each one now a part of Reach. The silence and solitude had made it exceedingly difficult for him to accept the losses. There was nothing to distract him this time, no battle to occupy his thoughts.

Six made his way to the top of one of the gun emplacements, sitting down to rest. It was the only thing he had now. CASTLE base was far out of reach to him, and the Pillar of Autumn was his last chance at escaping the planet. Accepting his fate, the Spartan removed his helmet, breathing the air of Reach for the last time. The once crisp air now choked him with heat and smoke. Six could see a mountain in the distance, split in half by the Covenant's glassing. Dirt had somehow made it to the top of the emplacement, covering the tower he now sat on. The Spartan grabbed a handful of it, running it through his fingers. He smiled, seeing that he would die where he was meant to.

_He was exactly where he was supposed to be. _

Before he could completely relax, his enhanced hearing alerted him of a very familiar foe. He quickly put his helmet back on, looking to the east, using his visor's zoom to clearly show him the new threat. Multiple Phantoms and Spirits were flying in the area, and they seemed to be very aware of him, as they sped directly towards his position.

'_So this is how it ends, huh? Guess that's what I get for shooting down a Covenant cruiser...'_

He readied his DMR, quickly scanning the area for loose weapons and ammunition, and prayed to God that he would take as many of those bastards with him as he could.

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21:35 HOURS

Exhausted from the seemingly endless fighting, the noble Spartan stumbled onto his knees, ripping his damaged helmet off to get a full breath of air into his lungs. Standing fearlessly, he began firing at his hip with the MA37 he took from one of the dead marines that littered the area. Noble Six knew he would be joining his brethren soon.

But not yet.

The Covenant had long since abandoned sending any Unggoy and other regular infantry after the Lone Wolf, leaving the task of defeating the Human to the best of the Sangheili ranks. And even they were _still_ unsuccessful in killing this single target.

Killing yet another Ultra marching towards him with a plasma rifle, Six felt the first burn of plasma on his side, turning immediately to

kill the approaching Sangheili. Taking more hits, Six drew his pistol with his left arm and began firing on his enemies with both weapons, killing yet another two attackers, their corpses piling around him. Finally, an Ultra lunged at him, knocking him to the ground with an ideal position to deal the deathblow.

But the Spartan endured, knocking it to the side while still defending himself from a Zealot that attempted to impale him. Just as he disarmed the Zealot, he was attacked yet again by the Ultra, while the Zealot roared in rage and activated an energy dagger. For just a split second, the lieutenant noticed out of the corner of his eye that a calm Field Marshall stood close, activating an energy sword, seeming to wait for the ideal moment. Enraged at the memory of the Zealot killing Emile, Six pulled the Ultra onto him just when the Zealot attempted a killing blow, guiding its dagger into the back of its comrade. Using the moment to his advantage, he jumped up and dug his combat knife into the neck of the Zealot, mirroring Noble Four's actions just hours earlier.

"Welcome to Noble Team, bastard!"

The defiant Spartan now collapsed to his knees, exhausted from the intense firefight. Panting, he still had the energy to look up and see the Field Marshall, now flanked by a dozen Zealots, all armed with swords and plasma rifles. Murmuring in their own language, the one closest to the leader walked to Six, ready to finish him for good. It spoke directly to him, and in English.

"This is where you die, Demon!"

It had fallen for Six's trap; taken the bait. Just in the moment it raised its energy sword, Six dove with all his remaining stamina, impaling the Zealot with one of the swords dropped by Six's original attackers. Both falling to the ground, Six drove the sword through its body all the way to his grip, smiling in the aliens now shocked face.

Finally done, the Spartan fell back onto the ground, catching himself with his hands, looking to the Field Marshall with a look of arrogance on his face, and smiled at the Sangheili before him.

"Is this all the might of the great Covenant Empire? Is __**this**__ all you can muster against one lone Spartan! I have defeated your kind more times than I can ever hope to count! I would rather die than waste my effort sending more of you to Hell!"

Six fell to his side, barely able to remain conscious from the blood loss and fatigue now. The Field Marshall made his way over to Six, standing over him like the Angel of Death. But rather than finally kill him, which is what Noble Six now welcomed, he instead deactivated the energy sword that was to relieve Six of all his pains and torments.

"You have shown yourself to be a worthy enemy, human. This planet will not be your grave."

Two of the Zealots came to the defenseless Spartan, grabbing him and taking him to one of the Phantoms that had been lingering on the outside of the outpost.

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COVENANT CARRIER, SWIFT REPENTANCE

UNKNOWN OUTLYING STAR SYSTEM

NOVEMBER 3, 2552

"Field Marshall, I do not disagree that the Humans have shown themselves to be valiant and honorable. I too feel that they should at least be allowed to join our Holy Covenant. I even think that they could be considered equal to us. But, if the Prophets were to learn that we have a living Spartan onboard... and the Jiralhanae numbers on our ship are significant as wellâ€¦ We will not be on this distant assignment forever, and we'll reestablish communications with the fleet when we leave this system."

The Field Marshall looked at the Spec Ops officer next to him, looking him directly in the eyes. He could see that his friend was not afraid of the Jiralhanae or the Prophets, at least not like a coward. But concern was in his eyes. And rightly so.

"Then I would be the one held responsible. It was my decision to keep the Spartan alive, and I intend to keep doing so. We may have found their home world, but I do not think we can ever truly defeat the Humans. I wish to use this Spartan to show the Council the value of humanity, and that they should be allowed into our Holy Covenant."

"As you wish, Field Marshall. You have led us this far with absolute victory. I will not start to question your judgment now. Speaking of the matter: have you spoken to our captive recently?"

The Field Marshall turned slightly towards his companion, amused how easily intrigued even his best lieutenants were by the Spartan they found on the Human planet of Reach. The younger Sangheili proved to be extremely interested in learning about him.

"Indeed I have, Sesa. He may not be thrilled by our kind, but he has no choice until I can reveal him safely to the Council. I have explained this to him, and he has been surprisingly cooperative to that goal. I doubt he likes it, but maybe he realizes his race needs to find a peaceful solution to the warâ€¦"

Before he could finish, another Sangheili, only a Minor, rushed onto the bridge and immediately began yelling for their commander. "Field Marshall! I have urgent news for you! You need to be made aware of this at once!" The Sangheili was now standing before him, panting and unable to speak more for the moment.

"You are here, sergeant, now rest. I assume this means you have been able to receive transmissions since we lost contact with the fleet last month? What is so important that you had to come all the way from communications to tell me in person?"

"This, sir. I have a message from Rtas 'Vadumee of Special Operations Command. Please, if you would let me play it on the holotankâ€¦"

"As you desire, sergeant."

The Sangheili Minor moved to one of the command consoles, punching in a short series of codes and activated the transmission received only moments ago. Special Operations Commander Rtas 'Vadumee appeared on screen, holding the head of a Brute Chieftain.

"My fellow Sangheili! Let my voice be heard and heed my warning! The Prophets have betrayed us and led us astray! The bastard Truth is using the Jiralhanae to slaughter our brothers, eliminating us to be replaced by those mindless beasts. All but a few Councilors are dead, at the hands of the mongrel beasts! The Halos are not what we think they are, and even worse: we have been murdering our allies for decades now. That is right, brothers! The Humans are not our enemy! I urge you all to cease any attacks on Humanity, and turn your attention to our long-standing nemesis, the Jiralhanae. On the blood of our fathers and sons, we will avenge our fallen brethren!"

The transmission cut after that, leaving the room wild with anger. The dozens of Sangheili on the bridge roared in anger and frustration after learning of the many lies they had recently believed so fervently in. They demanded blood, and blood they shall receive.

"Sir, I also have confirmed transmissions that the Kig-Yar and Yanme'e have solely joined the Prophets' side. They are all to be treated as enemies. The Unggoy and Mgalekgolo have almost solely vowed to follow us into battle. Those on this ship should follow our command willingly."

The sergeant, now finished, stood back from the Field Marshall, who was still contemplating his next action. Several of his soldiers walked towards him, a look of vengeance in their eyes. The Spec Ops officer he had been speaking to earlier was the first to ask him.

"What are our orders, Field Marshall? What would you have us do?"

Their leader turned to his companions, fury filling his eyes and vengeance filling his heart.

"You shall kill all of the traitors on this ship. Show no mercy and leave none alive. Make them suffer the deaths they now deserve!" They all roared with quick acceptance, all drawing their weapons and leaving to issue orders to the rest of the ship. The Field Marshall stopped the Spec Ops officer, pulling him to the side and speaking very intently. "You, Sesa, will accompany me to the brig. We have a special guest that will most certainly be glad to join the fight."

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Noble Six sat in the corner of his cell, making himself as comfortable as possible. He had spent the past two months in it, and was now actually beginning to enjoy the space. At least, he had finally convinced himself to do so.

The Sangheili had surprisingly let him keep all of his armor, save

his helmet that now rested on Reach. He was happy he could still find some comfort, especially after all that he had endured recently. Why the Sangheili were keeping him alive, he still didn't really understand. The Field Marshall of the carrier had spoken to him almost daily, claiming he wished to show the "Council" the value of Humanity. Maybe he was being honest, maybe he wasn't. Either way, Noble Team was dead, and Six was still stuck in that damn cell, Brutes guarding him every moment since he arrived.

He reached into his soft case and pulled out the three sets of dog tags he had been carrying, each one worn and faded from his constant touch. Two of them were covered in dry blood; the other was clean, as if it belonged to someone still alive. Carter's was missing from the collection, left somewhere on the surface of Reach in a pile of rubble and debris. He took the second one from the group, looking it over slowly and reading the inscription on it to himself.

'_Lieutenant Commander Catherine-B320, SPARTAN-III PROGRAM. I'm sorry I couldn't save you, Kat. I should've turned around in timeâ€¦|'_

He was interrupted by a few tremors through the hull, causing him to tense a little. He sat up, looking to the two Brutes that were guarding outside his cell. They seemed to be alert to something also, as they had begun to yell at each other in their guttural language.

A Human attack, perhaps? It seemed unlikely that anything in the remaining UNSC fleet would be capable of damaging a carrier like the one he was on. Far more likely it was something the Spartan didn't expect. And that couldn't have been truer.

Noble Six heard the door of the brig open, the Brutes now yelling at whoever entered. They raised their weapons, only to be quickly and efficiently gunned down by a hail of plasma fire. Now very intrigued, Six stood up and walked to the shield that acted as the barrier for his cell, only to find the Field Marshall he had met on Reach, escorted by several other Elites. One of them, dressed in the blue armor of a Minor, hit a few of the console controls by his cell, and his cell's shields dropped. The Field Marshall then picked up the needle rifle one of the Brute guards had been holding, offering it to Noble Six with several ammunition canisters.

"Come, Spartan. We have much to discuss."

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He could barely hear it; something in the back of his mind. He felt like it was trying to get his attention. But he wasn't certain.

'_Lieutenant, wake upâ€¦|'_

The Spartan could barely understand the voice in his mind, trying to reach him.

"Wake up Six!"

This time it got him, snapping the Spartan awake and causing him to roll off the sofa, landing on the floor with an uncomfortable thud.

"Agh, Leliana. Isn't it a little early to be waking me up?"

"If it was early in the morning, then yes, you could say that. But I think I can wake you up when it's past 1200, Six" Leliana answered, a faint hint of sarcasm in her voice.

Six quickly focused, looking down at his TAC/PAD to see the time. He couldn't even remember the last time he had slept in so late.

"What? why would you let me sleep so long? I'm sure Shepard has things for us to do"

"Actually Six, EDI spoke with me this morning to forward a message from the commander: he returned after us last night with the Justicar, and gave the whole team today off. He recommended letting you get some rest, after hearing about your fight with the Krogan. And sleeping in your armor, on a couch, won't be doing you any favors. We are supposed to go shopping for amenities for the cabin once you are ready.

Six stood up, cracking his back after considering his AI's comments. His head throbbing unsurprisingly, he looked down at the table Leliana was standing on to see the bottle of scotch, half empty. He coughed at the sight, and walked over to the sink Gardner had installed for him and immediately began drinking from the faucet.

Leliana, ever aware of the Spartan's thoughts and feelings, also looked down at the liquor that had quickly disappeared last night. She had a concerned, almost sad look on her face, seeing what the Spartan did to himself. She held her tongue for a few moments, feeling rude to actually say something to him. But her logical mind eventually got the better of her. And a few seconds are an eternity for an AI to ponder things. "Didn't I say something about drinking that stuff last night, Lieutenant?"

Using his usual answer for the question, Six simply ignored Leliana. She may have gotten him to open up about Noble Team last night, but this was a fight she simply wasn't going to win for a while. He took a few more gulps of water, and then turned to his armor stand and began removing pieces, setting them in order on the stand.

After only a few minutes of undressing to his scrubs, Six grabbed his towel and walked out of his cabin, down the hall and into the bathroom. Quick to lock the door, he was thankful the rest of the crew had already awoke and cleaned for the day, leaving him time to enjoy a hot shower. Just before he stood in, he examined the knife wound on his shoulder, seeing that the medi-gel had worked very effectively. He was impressed that it was even quicker than bio-foam.

Stepping into the hot water, the wound burned even more than it did when it was actually inflicted, but after a few moments he adapted to it, and began to wash all the dry blood off his body. It was more than he had lost for a long time, coloring the water he basked in into a diluted red-mess. He didn't care one bit; he was just happy to relax for a few minutes. The shopping he was going to be doing later

sounded as much of a chore as anything he had ever been forced to do. Hopefully Turians and Quarrians like to spend creditsâ€|

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"Lieutenant, how are you feeling today? I hope you had a comfortable rest." Doctor Chakwas stood up from her desk, walking over to the Spartan, seeing him fully clad in his armor again.

"I feel fine, doctor. I didn't come for a checkup on myself anywaysâ€|"

"Don't be brash, Lieutenant. Let me take a look at that wound againâ€| Well, it seems to be healing nicely. I'm surprised at how quickly your body absorbed the medi-gel. Any normal Human would likely still be bleeding from a stab so deep. But don't think that means you have my permission to go waltzing around as if you can be shot on a daily basis."

"Heh, I'll try to keep that in mind, doctor. But I was saying before; I came here to see someone, not get a checkup for myself. How is she doing? Is she going to be ok?"

"You know Lieutenant, you're being more anxious than the time Liara was wounded on Virmire. She was knocked unconscious by Saren, and Shepard tried staying awake by her bed the entire time she was out. I ended up giving him a sedative in a glass of water. Don't make me do the same to you." She shot Six a teasing scowl, but serious enough to make him realize that she probably wasn't joking. "She's going to be just fine, Lieutenant. Though I expect her to have a headache for a few hoursâ€| Ah, Tali! I'm glad to see you're waking up."

They both looked over to the bed, seeing its Quarian occupant stirring under her sheets. Tali sat up in bed, stretching several times and yawning before reaching to the top of her helmet.

"Keelah, what happened to me? My head feels like it's going to ruptureâ€|"

"It's just some minor bruising, dear. The mercenary captain gave you quite a whap with her pistol. Luckily, that helmet you're stuck wearing probably saved you a lot of trouble. Any Human hit like that would normally suffer some brain damage. You should be just fine by the end of the day."

Still rubbing her helmet symbolically, she looked at the doctor while swinging her legs over the bed. "Thank you, Doctor Chakwas. You're exactly the person I would want looking after meâ€| But what happened to Garrus and Six?"

"Maybe you should ask him yourself, dear?"

Tali, still dazed from the bruise on the back of her head, spun around to see the Spartan, standing right next to her bed. "Six! You're ok! I'm glad you and Garrus got away safely fromâ€| wait, Garrus is safe right?"

Six chuckled a little, relieved to see that Tali was already acting

normal for herself. Thinking of others as usual. "Yea, he's just fine Tali. I'd guess he's up in the forward batteries, calibrating something. We handled the merc as soon as she hit you, and we brought you back here to the Normandy as soon as we could."

"That's the typical understatement I should expect from you, Lieutenant. Tali, Noble Six lunged at the Asari mercenary so quickly she didn't have time to shoot. Then he carried you by himself from the shuttle bay, sprinting in here as if you had a suit rupture. You may not have been in a life threatening situation, but the Lieutenant ran in here and made me attend to you right away regardless. It was very charming, Tali."

"You, you did that, Six?" He nodded, hiding his embarrassment behind his visor. "Keelah, thank you. That mercenary would have killed me if she only had another moment. Thank you." Tali stood up and walked to him, hugging him as if there was nothing uncomfortable about it for Six.

He awkwardly accepted, returning the gesture for a moment before Tali let go and sat back down on the bed, still rubbing the side of her helmet. "Do I need to stay any longer, doctor? I think I'll be fine after a little bit. I should probably get back to engineering."

"You're free to go, dear. Just mind your head for a while. I don't want to see you back in here tomorrow because of a concussion. Taking the next few days off would do you some good. If I recall correctly, the commander had recommended that you and Garrus accompany the lieutenant on a shopping excursion. And I agree; the three of you need some time off. If I see you in engineering I'll drag you out myself."

"What? Why would he say that?" Tali turned to look at Six, realizing her comments could easily be misinterpreted. "I mean, not that I don't want to. It's just that I don't need anything. I should be back in engineering preparing for the mission andâ€¦"

"And I am giving you a doctor's order that you take the day off. Lieutenant, why don't you escort Miss Vas Neema to the mess hall for some lunch? Then the two of you and Garrus should do some shopping around Nos Astra."

Six looked at Chakwas, then to Tali. He could see that the Quarian wasn't happy to be pried from her duties, but he also didn't want to go shopping in Nos Astra alone. And he doubted Garrus would be of any help picking out a bed and furniture. "Doctor's orders, Tali. Looks like you're coming with me this time."

"Hmph, fine. But if the Normandy's engines don't start when we try to leave Illium, it's going to be your fault Six" she proclaimed as she walked out of the med bay.

Six stood there, arms outstretched in shock. "How am I the bad guy, here? Thanks a lot, doctor!"

"Oh, don't worry lieutenant. I just did you a favor, leaving you with Tali for the rest of the day."

The Spartan turned around to see her, now sitting on her desk and

looking at him with a mischievous smile.

"What are you talking about, doctor?"

"Nothing, lieutenant. I just had a feeling you wouldn't want to go shopping alone. Now go and catch up to Tali" she answered, winking at him and sitting down at her computer.

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"So let me get this part straight, Six: you've been around for what, 27 years? And you've never gone shopping for anything more than a few drinks?" Garrus was unable to comprehend what the Spartan had told him earlier. "It may not be my favorite pastime, but I still know how to do it."

"That's right, Garrus. I've been in the military practically my whole life. Besides a bottle of scotch, what else would I need to get that the UNSC wouldn't have given me? And if you ask me, this shopping thing can be left to the girls."

"Well it's a good thing you brought me along then, Six" Kasumi interjected, leaving the Turian to wait to respond. "You two would be lost without me helping you. And Tali won't spend a single credit on herself, so she's no help."

"Hey! I just don't need anything! That doesn't mean I can't, you know, shop for stuff!" the Quarian shouted. While she was a brilliant machinist, Tali was just as lost as Noble Six and Garrus when it came to shopping. Shopping malls weren't exactly abundant on the Flotilla.

"Oh, save it Tali. You aren't any better at this than these two knuckleheads. Speaking of you two; why did the both of you insist on wearing your armor? If we're going to be spending money, I'm making sure you both get new outfits. And I bet they don't have changing rooms with enough hooks to hang all that stuff on. Did you wear that armor on purpose?"

"Well, that definitely wasn't our plan Kasumi. We both really wanted to get so new clothes. I mean, those Collectors wouldn't shoot at us if we were dressed nice!" Six said sarcastically, waving his hands in the air to mock the thief. "I asked for some help with my cabin, not my wardrobe. What's this place you're taking us to, anyways?"

"It's a department store called Bazar Astra. We'll find all the things you need to have a cabin that looks just like mine."

"I can't wait."

"Oh, hush. You'll thank me when you aren't sleeping on a sofa. If you three get really bored, this store has an outfitting department, too. They'll have all sorts of weapons and armors. Maybe we can get something for you, Garrus. You kind of need some armor that doesn't have a hole in it."

Garrus looked down and examined his armor, having forgotten the

damage from the gunship on Omega. "But, I've had this since I worked at C-Sec. Why would I replace it?"

"Every time you talk about C-Sec, you whine that 'they slow people down' and 'Pallin was a pain in the ass' or 'too much paperwork'. I thought you'd be happy to get rid of that armor. You don't seem the sentimental type."

"Well, it's not that. But I've had it for yearsâ€¦| Iâ€¦|"

"Well then it's time for an upgrade. Six said he has enough creds to buy anything we want. And since he won't spend it himself, I'm going to do it for him." Kasumi smiled ear to ear, and walked up ahead of the others into the department store.

Garrus walked over and nudged the Spartan in the side. "Looks like you made a mistake telling her that, Six. Heh, I can't wait to see what she picks out for you."

"Yea, I'm beginning to think the same thing Garrus. At least I don't have to do it myself. Come on, let's go and see what she has in mind. I have a feeling I'll have to keep her from spending _all_ my money."

The three companions proceeded to walk into the department store, walking in through the automatic doors to be greeted by a large, open atrium. Escalators went up to multiple floors, each one looking as if it was dedicated for a certain department. Hundreds of people of all different races walked around, smiling and laughing as they enjoyed and purchased the best Illium had to offer.

"Wow. I kind of have to admit; this place seems like fun" Garrus stated.

"It makes me feel like we're on the Flotilla. The crowd, the noise; it's great!" Tali exclaimed, looking around like the first time she set foot on the Citadel.

"Huh. Maybe Kasumi can actually make this fun. If nothing else, I'm going to buy some stuff for the two of you before we leave. It's the least I can do" said Six.

The three companions looked around some more, locating Kasumi on an escalator to the next floor up. Waving at them to follow her, the three walked over to the base of the same escalator and followed her up. At the top, they were greeted by Kasumi, already holding store brochures of different bed sets.

"Look at this one, Six! It's a traditional North American style bed frame, and it's a king size! Otherwise we have this other one hereâ€¦| Asari design. It looks a little weird, but it's the most in-style selection right now."

"Well, I want to be fashionable don't I?" he quipped with a hidden smirk.

"Very funny. Come on over and look at them in person before you make a decision. They're both right over here."

The four then walked over from the escalator, making their way into

the furniture section of the store. They passed several sofa and chair selections before reaching the bedding. The two that Kasumi had picked out were right in the middle of the display area; probably because they were the most expensive. Six _did_ say she had permission to buy whatever she wantedâ€|

"Ok, here are the two that I already showed you. What do you think? Oh, and if you don't like them, there are a few others here that I would also allow you to buy" Kasumi said.

"Wait a minute Kasumi: I have to have your permission before I pick one of these out to keep?" Six asked.

"Of course. I won't let you go back to the Normandy with some ugly hunk of garbage. You're going to be spending a long time on the Normandy, Six. We can't have you in something less-than perfect. Now come on, make a decision!"

He looked the two sets over, having a surprisingly hard time making a decision. The Human-made bed frame was dark metal, and looked like it would match the interior of the Normandy well. But the Asari frame wasâ€| somehow appealing. It had an organic feel to it, just like a Separatist ship. If someone had asked him before Reach what he thought, he'd probably light the bed on fire. But after spending so much time on their ships, the Spartan actually developed affection for them.

"I'm having a hard time deciding on this, actually. What do you two think?" he asked, turning to Garrus and Tali.

Garrus was the first to answer him. "Hah! Remember that I'm the one who sleeps on a cot in the forward batteries every night. I'm not really the person to ask for help, Six. Tali can offer a female opinion for you."

"Ok Tali. Which one would you want to sleep in? I meanâ€| if you were getting this for yourself." He was quicker to catch himself this time, but stumbling over his words again made Six once again nervous. But, as usual, Tali didn't even get a hint.

"Well, they're both nice. But, if I had to choose one, I guess it would be the Human design. It reminds me a little of our bunks on the Neema. Except this is bigger than what an Admiral would even get" Tali said.

"It's settled then. This is the perfect one, Kasumi. What else do you insist we shop for now?"

"Actually, for now the three of you can walk around the store. I have to sort the shipping out with the managers over there. It'll be delivered to the Normandy and set up before we get back. They'll even take some of the benches in your cabin out to make room for everything."

"Everything?" Six asked.

"Yea, everything. You get a night stand and a couple sofa chairs to match it. _You did_ say I could spend some creds, Sixâ€|"

"Heh, alright Kasumi that's fine. I've got plenty from those Eclipse

mercs from the last mission. Might as well spend it on something. And speaking of that; you two are coming with me for some new gear. Don't bother arguing with me, either." He took both Garrus and Tali by the arm and dragged them off towards the outfitting section, intent on buying them both some new gear.

They only struggled momentarily, both realizing they were not going to overpower the Spartan that was dragging them. They walked around a little bit following Six, eventually making their way back to the center of the building with the escalators.

"Why are we stopping here, Six?" asked Tali.

"Well, I was going to drag you both off to the outfitters. But I realized that I don't know my way around the store" he said, rubbing the back of his neck in embarrassment. "I can't read anything on the directory."

"And you were so determined to take us shopping Six. Now you need our help, hmmm?" Tali asked, playfully. "Come on, I already looked up where the right sections are. Just follow me."

Tali led the way for Garrus and Six, giving them another chance to look around the store. Six was simply amazed at everything he saw. The open design of the department store allowed him to look at all the different floors, seeing clothing, furniture, electronics, jewelry, and more things that he didn't even understand. It must have been alien stuff.

None of it really interested him; what did grab his attention were all the different aliens. While he and Garrus were on the Citadel, they were in such a rush that he didn't get a real chance to look at the different races. The Asari were easy to get used to; they just looked like women who fell into a tub of blue food coloring filled with squids. And the Turians were close enough to Sangheili he was comfortable around them. But the Hanar, Volus, and Elcor? They were another story.

"All these aliens are soâ€¦"

"Ugly? Is that what you think of me Six? I'm insulted!" blurted Garrus, clearly playing with the Spartan.

"Heh, funny Garrus. I wasn't even talking about the Turians. You're alright. It's some of these other ones, like the Volus and the Hanar. I didn't really notice how different they were on the Citadel. Isn't it weird being around so many different races wherever you go?"

"It's not like that Six. At least, not for most people. Of course there are always people in the galaxy, regardless of their own race, that hate aliens. But we all grow up knowing that the entire galactic community is waiting for us, and it's just a part of life. I couldn't even imagine trying the galaxy if we all kept to ourselves. If everyone in your galaxy had already been willing to work together, that war you fought may never have happened."

Six snapped his head to look at Garrus, quickly noticing the Turian had phrased his statement in the wrong way accidentally. Apparently, Turians did have pigment in their scales, as Garrus' face turned as

white as snow. Tali had even stopped in her tracks, turning to look at Six, seemingly waiting for what he would do.

"Sixâ€¦ I didn't mean for that to come out the way it did. I don't think it wasâ€¦"

"Relax Garrus; I know it was a mistake. It's just a touchy subject, even though it's over. And just to make sure you know, I don't blame aliens for what happened. It was just one insane fool that made the decision. If my superiors gave me a questionable order, I'd still follow it. It was no different for the war."

"Ummm, alright. I mean, if you really aren't mad about itâ€¦"

"Don't worry Garrus. If you ever do piss me off, you'll know." He patted his Turian friend on the back, and kept walking, motioning Tali to continue leading the way.

The three continued walking for a few more minutes, going up a few more floors and winding around some corners to finally make it to the weapons and armor section.

"I think I'm in Heavenâ€¦" Six stated.

The view before him was something pretty close. Hundreds of weapons, armor sets, and upgrades on display made the three of them smile like kids. And to make Tali even happier, in the center of the floor was a tech table, littered with Omni-tools and upgrades.

"I think we're going to be here for a while" Garrus said with a big grin.

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Author's Note:

Well, there you have it. That's how Six escaped Reach in my story. I didn't want anything too dramatic, like having Jun swoop down in a Falcon and save the day. I wanted to include a reason Six is so acceptable of aliens, and I figured this would work. Working with the Sangheili for some time helped him get over the past.

I don't intend to show any more of his events while on the carrier, or with the Elites at all for that matter. Eventually, he was brought back to Earth and that's that. He helped kill all of the Loyalists on the carrier, and whoever else the Field Marshall fought over the next few months.

Now it's time to focus again on the real story, and as always, I'm more than excited to have feedback and reviews to help shape the story for the chapters to come.

Thanks!

11. Shopping

"Hey Garrus, come over here and look at this. I think you'll like it"

said Six.

"What did you find? I hope it's not another one of those Omni-tool games you think are so great" Garrus replied, as he came over from one of the armor stands.

"No really, come over here and look at this." Once Garrus had come from around the corner, he saw Six standing in front of an armor stand, holding a very impressive set of Turian military-grade armor. "What do you think of this?"

Looking the armor over, even the pessimistic Garrus was impressed by what he saw. The heavy armor sparkled in the bright store lights, its silver and red color scheme catching his eye. "That'sâ€¦ impressive. You even picked out something made by Armax. That's _very_ impressive Six. Most Humans don't know much about Turian armor."

"Well, don't get too impressed. I actually just asked the Asari over there which armor set was the most expensive for Turians. I figured it would be a good place to start looking. I grabbed the specs sheet for it, too. Here, take a look at it."

Garrus took the page from the Spartan, looking over the technical details to see just how special this armor could be. Reading through it, he saw that the shield strength was already a 50% increase over his worn-out C-Sec issue armor. And, the larger power supply meant the shield recharge rate was decreased by 25%. The armor itself was a titanium alloy normally reserved for heavy vehicles, making it nearly impervious to small arms fire, while also shedding several pounds from his C-Sec armor. To top it all off, this armor had no holes in it.

"Everything about it is outstanding Six. I couldn't find a better set of armor, unless you can make a set of your armor for a Turian, heh." Still admiring the piece, he glanced down at the side of it and saw the price tag. Curious, he flipped it around to see just how expensive this thing could actually be. It was enough to cause the Turian to drop the tag as if it was on fire. "Whoa, Six. I can't let you buy this for me. Not with a price like that."

"Are you Kasumi now? I need your permission to spend my money?" he quipped, crossing his arms and tilting his head at the Turian. "I'd be dead on that world Canalus if it wasn't for you. You might as well try the armor on; otherwise I'll have to guess your size and that's what you'll end up with."

Garrus simply shrugged in response, being smart and quick enough to figure out the lieutenant would go through with his plan. There was no point in arguing. "Alright, Six. I can just go tell someone working here what size I need. I can even wear it out of the store if that makes you realize I appreciate it. Thanks Six." The Turian patted the Spartan on the shoulder, offering a sincere smile.

"No problem Garrus. I was getting tired of seeing you in armor with holes in it. Here's the account number for the purchaseâ€¦ Now I'm going to go and check on Tali. She's been gawking at the Omni-tools the whole time we've been here. I better see what I can get for her."

As he turned to leave, Six was stopped by Garrus before he could even

completely turn around. "Hey Six, just one thing; Quarians are very selfless people. They don't have much in their Flotilla, and it really shows with all of the ones I've met. And Tali is the worst. You're gonna have some trouble buying her anything. Hell, it took me five minutes of arguing once for her to let me buy her a drink on the Citadel."

"Heh, thanks Garrus. I've already gotten that impression from her. I'll just have to be creative, I guess. Come find us once you get set up in your new armor."

The Turian nodded to the Spartan, and then turned around to find one of the store employees. Six turned himself, spotting Tali at the Omni-tool displays, and immediately walked over to her. She was so deeply immersed in eyeing the different products that Six had to tap her on the shoulder before she even noticed him, startling her.

"Six! I didn't see you come up behind me! Where's Garrus?" She almost jumped into the air in surprise.

"He's over there getting a new set of armor. I finally convinced him to let me get him something better than the damaged goods he's wearing. I was tired of seeing him in the old junk with a rocket hole. He was determined to avoid me, but I finally got him. He seems pretty stubborn, though."

"Yes, Garrus can be very stubborn. I don't need to tell you all the stories about him; you already know yourself. Anyways, did you need something from me?"

"What, I can't just talk to you because I want to? I need a reason? I didn't realize you were so popular, Tali."

"What? No! Iâ€¦ I just didn't think you, you knowâ€¦ wanted to chat. I'm sorry. What can I help you with? Wait, that was the same answerâ€¦ and now I'm babblingâ€¦"

"Relax Tali. Don't be so nervous. Now you sound like me."

"What do you mean? I've never seen you nervous."

'_Whoa, that was a close one' _he thought to himself. "Oh, nothing Tali. But I could use some help picking out an Omni-tool. I got a basic one from the Normandy, but I was really hoping for something special. You seem like you know something about them. What should I get?"

She motioned Six to follow her, leading him to the other side of the display tables. "Here, this one is really nice. It's a Polaris X model, made by a Human company, Kassa Fabrication. It offers some great performance, but it isn't ridiculously expensive. I've got one of the older models, a VII. It's worked well since I got it two years ago."

"That looks nice Tali, but which one is the best? If you could pick any model here, which one would you want?"

"Well, that's easy. It's right over here." She led him just down the counter, to a section that was displayed separately from all the

others. "These are all the models that the Serrice Council makes. It's an Asari consortium from Thessia. They make the best Omni-tools and Biotic amps in the entire galaxy. "The Savant lines are the best ones you can get anywhere."

"Hmmm, well it sounds like that's what I should get. Sir?" He waved to a Salarian working behind the counters. He rushed over as soon as he saw Six was standing in front of the Serrice Council products.

"Yes Human, what can I help you with? Would you like to look at the Serrice products? I'd be happy to show them to you!" he answered, excited to sell one of the Omni-tools.

"Actually, I'm ready to buy one. This Savant X; my friend here told me that's the best anyone can get."

"Absolutely! You won't find a better Omni-tool anywhere else. Hereâ€¦ let me take it out of the case so you can see how it works." The cheerful Salarian opened several locks and security pads under the display before reaching in and taking out the small box containing the Omni-tool. "Here it is. Would you like me to help you with it?"

"Actually, my friend here can show me everything. Here's my account information, if you could ring me up?" He gave the Salarian his credit chit, and took the Omni-tool in response.

"Of course! I'll be right back with your receipt and warranty information!"

"Hey, Tali; I don't really understand these things yet. Could you put this on your arm for a little bit and show me everything with it?"

While she was surprised by Six's request, Tali would never let a chance to play with such expensive tech slip past her. "Of course, I'd love to. I've always dreamed of using one of these. You're really lucky to have one. I hope you don't mind spending so many credits on it."

"Nah, I just got them from Eclipse anyways. Besides, I need to spend them on something. Might as well use it to help the mission. What can you tell me about this?"

She played with it for a bit before she answered the Spartan. She wanted to be as thorough as she could be. "It's even nicer than I thought! The interface is so easy to use, and it's faster than any other Omni-tool I've ever seen. I can show you more if you let me sync it with your old Omni-tool."

"Don't worry about that, we can do that later. Just use your own for now. We can change it later, right?"

'Ummm, yes. But I don't want to seem like I'm taking it from you or anything."

"Of course not, Tali. Now come on; sync it with yours so you can tell me more about it."

Tali went through some of the commands, locating her own Omni-tool's wireless network and synched the information to the new one. She felt uncomfortable doing so, but only because she didn't want to seem like she was using Six's brand new Omni-tool for herself. She was having so much fun playing with such advanced tech. "There it is, I've got all my files on it. Let me show you how to access your armor's interface withâ€|"

"Here you go, Lieutenant, ummm, B312. I've got all the data pads for you to fill out too" interrupted the Salarian. He returned the credit chit, and placed several data pads on the counter. "Just fill out the blanks with your initials, and sign the bottom on each one. And if you were planning on giving this to someone, just write their name in the beneficiary box."

"Thanks for the help. I think this was the right choice. I'll do this quick." He stormed through the data pads in a hurry, eager to finish the purchase. Tali was still so occupied playing with the Savant she didn't even notice what he was really doing. "Alright, that should be everything. Thanks again."

The Salarian looked over the information, and was surprised by what he saw on the last data pad. He took another blank one from behind the counter and scanned the information onto it, then held it out for Tali to take. "Here you go, ma'am. I hope you enjoy this; you've got a really generous friend here!"

Tali took the pad, surprised, holding it in her hands dumfounded for a few moments. "Wait, what are you giving this to me for?" The Salarian had already rushed over to help another customer before he answered her. "Six, why did he give me this?"

"I don't know, maybe you should read it and find out for yourself" he answered with a playful shrug.

Puzzled, Tali looked down and started skimming through the lines until she found her name at the bottom. Reading around it, she was nothing short of shocked to see the whole sentence here name was in.

'_If the purchase of this Serrice Council Savant Model X Omni-tool is intended as a gift purchase, please disclose the beneficiary's name here for warranty concerns â€" Tali'Zorah vas Neema.'_

She could only stare in disbelief. "No, youâ€| _couldn't_ haveâ€|"

"Why not? I already got something for Garrus. I have to get you something too, Tali. Don't bother arguing; it already has all your files on it and you're the legal owner."

"You, planned the whole thing? Six, I know how much this costs; you can't spend that on me. It's more than most Quarians will make in their whole lives!"

"Well, you don't seem like most Quarians, Tali" he said. "Besides, it's a gift from one friend to another. It doesn't matter whether you're a Quarian or not. Come on, I could see how excited you were just _looking_ at the damn thing. Now you can use it."

Tali looked down, admiring the holographic display that now encased her arm. Even the shade of orange was slightly more appealing than the older Omni-tool. She could barely take herself from staring at it more in order to thank Six. She was unable to say anything; she just reached out and hugged him.

He was more receptive to her this time; after buying her an Omni-tool, he wasn't taken completely off-guard. "I'm glad you like it."

"Like it? Six, this is the most expensive gift anyone has ever given me! I love it! The nicest thing my father got for me was a new veil after my Pilgrimage. And that was for getting information on the Geth; what have I done to deserve anything from you?"

He let her go from their hug, holding her out with his hands on her shoulder. "It doesn't matter how expensive it was, Tali. I wanted to get something for you, and I know this really matters to you. You can use it for a long time, and do a lot of good with it. Now stop thanking me. I know you appreciate it."

He let her go, allowing her to start playing with her hands vigorously. She looked towards the ground when she spoke next. "Thanksâ€¦ I mean, it's very nice, Six. It means a lot." She stopped playing with her hands a few moments later, sharply raising her head to look around. "Should we go look for Garrus? He's probably ready to go by now."

"Yea, let's go see if he's got his new armor on yet. He should be in the back by the fitting rooms. Come on." The grey Spartan led the way, Tali close behind him, almost tripping on several displays because she couldn't take her eyes away from the new Omni-tool.

Around the next corner, they were happy to find their Turian friend. Even wearing the new, unique armor, Six was thankful Garrus was wearing his visor. The Lieutenant was getting better, but he still worried that if Garrus was next to some other Turians, he might have trouble picking him out.

"Six, Tali! Check out this armor. I have to say, I look pretty damn good in it. The girls at Flux are going to love it." Garrus may have been letting his ego speak, but he was right regardless. The new silver and red armor was pristine, making him stand out from all the C-Sec officers on the Citadel he used to look like. The blue lighting was a very nice touch, as well. "They already sent my old armor and the new helmet back to the Normandy. I'm all ready to go."

"That looks really great, Garrus. I'm almost jealous of you. Almost." Tali giggled a little, happy to see that her friend was wearing something that didn't belong in the trash. "Six got me a new Omni-tool, check it out!" She walked over to Garrus, lighting her arm up and showing him all the new features she would get to play with.

The two of them spent several minutes talking tech with each other, giving an unusually quiet friend the chance to speak with the Spartan. "So, Lieutenant; that was a pretty nice gift you got for Tali." Leliana turned his external speaker off, giving them a chance to chat for a moment.

"It wasn't that special. She can really use something like that. Besides, I got Garrus a whole set of armor. It's not like I'm playing favorites, Leliana."

"Oh really? Garrus needed that new armor. Wearing some old junk like what he had can endanger a mission. Especially one in vacuum. I know it was a gift for him, but it made sense, too. But that Omni-tool? Tali had one that worked more than adequately. Garrus got a mission item. Tali got a gift."

"Hmph, I suppose you have a point to this? Don't worry Leliana, I'm still focused on the mission. I won't let a friendship get in the way of what we have to do." He knew what she really meant; he wasn't stupid. But he was far from being certain of what was going through his own head. He wasn't about to get in an argument in the middle of a department store with a person who would appear to be himself.

And before his pesky AI had a chance to get back at him, Kasumi had a timely entrance with the group. "There you three are! I've been wandering around the whole department looking for you. I spent the whole time looking through the guns; I figured that's where I would find you. Guess I still have some learning to do."

"Hey Kasumi. Did you get everything sorted out with all my new stuff?" asked Six.

"Yup, it was no trouble. I had to bribe the movers to take it right now, but it wasn't much. Blue-collar workers are happy with a few creds and a pretty girl's wink. It doesn't matter what race they are; men are all suckers!"

"Hah, I'm glad to see you have so much pride in yourself, Kasumi" answered Garrus, very sarcastically.

"What can I say? I don't mind using everything I have to my advantage. You're just jealous women aren't dumb enough to fall for that charm you think you have, Vakarian." She playfully winked at him, and then turned to speak with Tali. "I can see Garrus got some new armor, Tali. What did you get today?"

"Six got me a new Omni-tool. It'sâ€¦ amazing. It's one of the nicest things anyone has ever done for me." As Kasumi was yet another techy, Tali walked over and started showing Kasumi her new toy.

"Don't make it such a big deal Tali. I just thought you'd be happy with something like that."

"Well, if that's how you feel about giving out top of the line Omni-tools, there's a jewelry store just down on the next floorâ€¦" Kasumi teased, smiling a big, toothy grin at the Spartan.

"Very funny, Kasumi. If I didn't think you would just steal what you want later, I'd be happy to take you."

"Please, Six. You couldn't afford the things I want. Trust me."

He turned to Garrus, both shrugging their shoulders at each other. Kasumi obviously had unique taste. He wouldn't complain if she didn't want to spend more of his money. Between the armor, Omni-tool, and

all the new furniture, he would have to wait a few weeks before his account would recover.

"Looks like we can head back to the Normandy. Everyone ready?" asked Six.

"Yea, I'm getting pretty hungry anyways. We should grab some dinner back in the mess hall, and then we'll have to play some cards in your room Six. Gotta try the new furniture out" said Garrus.

"Sounds fun to me. We'll make a stop at a liquor store on the way and we'll be set."

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"Lieutenant, are you sure you're ready to have the others in your cabin? They'll think it's weird if you keep your armor on the whole time." Leliana was once again on the center table, only now she was surrounded by plush sofa chairs and a corner sofa. Two more sofa chairs looked out the window, and the bed was tucked into the forward corner of the room. A larger refrigerator was at the other end, complete with a new bar and several bar stools. His armor stand was next to the bed. It looked just like Kasumi's room.

"I think it may have been a bad idea to let Kasumi decorate my roomâ€¦ I feel like we should be in a New York penthouse. Oh, and I don't care about the armor. I'm sure that they won't think twice about seeing me without it. I'm nothing special to look at. And I want to seem like a normal person. Not a seven-foot hulk of metal."

"Oh hush, Lieutenant. I've always thought you were a very handsome hulk of metal" she said with a wink. "At least you don't have a big medical bandage on the side of your face all the time. Maybe we don't notice much, but I bet some of those Turians we saw today took a second look at Garrus."

"Heh, maybe so. But I have the feeling Garrus would 'think it's sexy' or something. He seems like that type of person. Besides, Leliana; I'm not trying to impress anyone here. Not with my looks, at least."

"Of course, Lieutenant" she replied, forming an expression of frustration on her face. Sooner or later, she would get him to open up. She always won. "If you aren't going to be wearing your armor, where does that leave me?"

"What do you mean? You can stay right there on the table. What would be the problem?"

"Don't you remember what Shepard said about Tali? About all Quarians?"

He looked puzzled for only a few moments, clearly forgetting why he had been turning his armor's audio off every time the two of them talked. "Ahh, damn. How could I forget? Tali hates you." He noticed a look of shock on his AI friend, quickly correcting himself. "Well, not you personally, Leliana. But the whole AI thingâ€¦ I'm not quite

sure what to tell her yet. Maybe I can ease the topic in tonight while she's here. I'll start talking about EDI or something."

"Well, just don't rush it. I spoke with EDI about it earlier, and Tali really, really hates those Geth we fought on Haestrom. And any other AIs don't start much better than that. She still refuses to let EDI help her in engineering. Just ignore me if you don't have a good reason."

"Hmmm, doesn't sound like I have luck on my side. I'll figure something out, though. We're both friends. She'll just have to trust me on the topic."

"Do you really think she'll trust you? Even after all you've done, she has some good reasons why not to trust AIs. I mean, they only drove her people into an exile of living aboard starships!"

Six, surprised at Leliana's emotion on the topic, walked over and sat down on his new sofa, sitting right across from his AI. "What are you so worked up about? Do you really think it's that big of a deal? And why do you seem to be on her side for this?"

"I'm on her side because I don't think AIs should murder billions and drive their creators from their own planets! She may not be completely rational in her hatred for all AIs in this galaxy, but I don't blame her one bit. The Geth aren't made like me; they don't have human emotions like I do. I wouldn't be able to exterminate a sentient race and live with myself." Leliana sat down, crossed her legs and placed a hand to her forehead. "My point isâ€¦ I don't want her to hate you because she found out about me. Especially before she knows how different I am from the Geth. So, just ignore it for now. Place me in your armor and I'll just watch from the cameras."

"I guess I have nothing to say back. If that's how you want thisâ€¦ then I won't argue with you. But sooner or later, she'll find out. You won't be able to hide forever."

"I know. We'll think of something. But for now, I want you to be able to keep your friendship with someone for a change. It's just been us for a long time now. You, Garrus, Taliâ€¦ The three of you make a good team."

The Spartan smiled at her, placing his hand on the table as a friendly gesture. It was the most he could do. "That means a lot Leliana. Thanks. But don't think it means I'll forget about you. It's hard to when you can start talking to me every time I have my armor on, anyways, heh."

She smiled a little, and stood up to look at him directly. "I'm glad we always have each other, lieutenant. If I have to be stuck in a strange galaxy that hates AIs, I'm happy you're the one person with me."

"Same here, Leliana. Whatever happens with these Reapers, Collectors, whatever elseâ€¦ We're in it together."

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"Tali, hurry up! We were supposed to meet Six in his cabin five minutes ago. Let's not keep our new friend waiting" said Garrus, only a small hint of sarcasm in his voice. Much less than his usual self.

"Just give me a second; I need to bypass a few protocols on the engines here andâ€¦"

"Tali, the engines aren't going to shut down if you leave them for a few hours. Don't insult Ken and Gabby so much." Garrus looked over to the two Cerberus engineers, both clearly amused by his remark.

"What? I never said anything about them! I just need toâ€¦"

"Need to follow me for a game of cards and some drinks with Six. We're going now, Tali" he said, as he grabbed her by the arm and dragged her off into the elevator, hitting the switch before she could get away. "Don't tell me the Normandy can't take care of itself. We need a break, and so does Six. So just pretend you know how to have fun, and be nice."

"Oh, you don't think I can have fun, Garrus?" she said, crossing her arms and tilting her head. "I'll take that as a compliment, coming from the Turian who thinks killing mercs on Omega is fun." She laughed a little, happy that she had a friend like Garrus. "You know, it's really nice being back on the Normandy. I missed it all. The ship, Shepard, Doctor Chakwasâ€¦"

"And yours truly, of course" Garrus interrupted with a big grin.

"I was actually going to leave you out of it. I never really liked all the teasing you and Shepard put me through, heh."

"Well if I was naïve enough to believe that, then I could complain about when you and Shepard switched my Turian beer with that Human stuff. What was it? Budweiser? I was sick for days because of you two!"

"Heh, we felt so bad about that. We didn't think you'd actually be dumb enough to drink them all, though."

"Maybe so, but that goes to show you can't trust my better judgment to always come through. At least when I'm drinking."

"Speaking of Shepard; where is he? I haven't seen him since we got back from shoppingâ€¦"

"I talked to him a bit while you were down in engineering. He said he was going to go see Liara while we're here on Illium. He wanted to catch up a little. I can't say I blame him, butâ€¦"

"She's different now."

"Yea, I meanâ€¦ well let's not talk about that now. I think the elevator has been open for a few minutes." Garrus nodded his head to the side, prompting Tali to notice they had been standing in an open elevator the whole time. "Let's go get the drinks and food in the mess fridge, and we can finally have some fun. I hope the Quarian beer I got is something you like."

"Of course, Garrus. I usually don't get to drink anything but water in the Fleet; you could buy the worst brand and it would taste like a delicacy to me. Please, don't worry about me. Get yourself something nice for once."

"How sweet of you, Tali. As a matter of fact, I did get something nice. Since the lieutenant saved me a lot of money today, I bought a bottle of Palaven whiskey. It's the good stuff for Garrus tonight!"

"Keelah, how long until you're on the floorâ€|."

"Hey! Insult me all you want Tali, but don't think a few drinks are enough to do me in. Remember when you, Shepard and I were on the Citadel last? At Flux? I drank more than you and Shepard together, but I still was the one who had to call the cab!"

Tali felt a little sick, remembering that less-than pleasant time. "That was the first time I had drank more than a few sips of something. My father was so ashamed when I told him about it."

"Yea, I remember the mission the next day, the one where you, Shepard, Ashley, and I went down to Elatania. That one with the Prothean ruin hidden in the mountains. The two of you were so sick after all those bumps; I had to drive while Shepard was hiding in the back, and you were just rolled up in a ball."

"I think we should just get the food and drinks, and head on over to Six's cabin. We can talk about this later."

"Right, let's go."'

The two friends quickly made their way around the corner to the mess hall, grabbing their things from one of the community refrigerators. They had a quick chat with Gardner, and thanked him for keeping their dextro food in its own containers.

After another quick hello to Jacob, who was eating his dinner quietly by himself, Tali and Garrus walked down the hall to starboard observation.

After being so comfortable talking with Garrus, just as if the past two years hadn't even happened, when Tali got to the door into observation she suddenly had a feeling of nervousness fall on her. It wasn't something that happened much. Sure, when some angry Krogan of a Geth platoon were shooting at her, she'd break a sweat. But this was different. She feltâ€| something in her gut. Like she was floating.

Before Tali had a chance to really think about it, Garrus opened the door to find Six sitting on his new sofa, playing with his Omni-tool. And that feeling she had was quickly replaced with surprise. The lieutenant was casually dressed; his armor was on a stand in the corner.

"Hey guys, glad you both could come. When I first woke up on the Normandy, I wasn't sure what I was going to do with myself when we weren't on a mission. I'm glad I met some friends in this whole mess."

'_Friends? That's the second time he's called me that. What did I do to make him consider me a friend?' Tali thought to herself. It was welcome, none the less._

Six stood up and walked around the sofa to greet the two, stretching his hand out for them to take. Garrus hit him in the arm instead, so the Spartan returned the favor. Tali just giggled a bit, but was mostly focused on watching Six. It was the first time she had seen him without his armor on; it almost felt like he had been another Quarian.

He wasn't what Tali had expected. While she still had to look up at him, Six wasn't as intimidating without his armor on. He appeared like a regular Human now, just a tall one. He was very pale, more than most of the Humans she had met during her time travelling the galaxy. Shepard once told her that certain Humans "tanned" when they spent more time in sunlight. She figured with all the time Six spent in his armor, that's why he wasn't very "tan." His hair was blonde, a trait that was a rarity to occur naturally in Humans now. Ashley had told her once that most of the blonde Humans on the Citadel, especially the young women, dyed their hair to look that way. "Tramps, all of them!" Ashley would yell. Supposedly, it was the cool look. It seemed the lieutenant had a unique feature.

The look in his eyes stood out the most. She expected them to be full of laughter and happiness, just like how he acted. But something was wrong. He lookedâ€¦ sad, troubled; like he was trying to forgive himself. She had learned to read subtle facial cues from aliens, as they didn't provide as much body language to communicate as her own people. Tali saw right through Six, and she was certain he wasn't actually trying to send a message to anyone. Maybe if they got to know each other more, she would ask him about it.

"Come in and sit down. Kasumi picked out some great stuff. We should be able to relax for hours and be comfortable. You Turians don't need special chairs or anything, right?" he asked with a smirk.

"Well you might need to find one that is worthy of holding meâ€¦ but these will do just fine. For now, at least. Primarch Garrus deserves only the best in the future, so remember that!" Garrus walked over to the fridge in the corner and tossed some of his drinks inside, taking the rest with him as he sat down on one of the sofas. "Damn, Kasumi really did pick out the best stuff. As long as you're in a generous mood Six, I could make a shopping list of my own for her."

"Hah, don't push your luck Vakarian. I'm only letting you in here because Tali and I can't play a game of cards alone. By the way Tali, come and sit down. I've got plenty of chairs. I'll get your drinks for you; just make yourself comfortable."

"What? Oh, uh right. Thanks" she barely stuttered, as the lieutenant walked over to her and took her things and walked them over to the bar. She snapped herself out of her daze and walked around the table to a chair, sitting down with her drink. "So, what kind of game are we going to play?" She was eager to focus on something else.

"Actually, I was going to ask both of you that" Six said. "I don't know any card games that Turians and Quarians play, so I was hoping

you both could teach me something simple. We don't need to play for keeps or anything tonight."

"Don't think you'll get out so easy, Six. Shepard taught us a few Human card games back on the original Normandy. The Alliance had a larger crew than Cerberus, so we had more free time then. He taught us how to play Texas Hold'Em, and he said 'everyone who's anyone can play this,' or something like that. So don't try and pretend you don't know how to play."

"Hey, remember Garrus; I'm not from here. For all you know, we could play card games with decks of 100 where I'm from."

"Too bad you already made it clear most of your universe was the same. So grab a few beers, get comfortable, and be ready to lose some money. Because this Turian plays for keeps. And Tali isn't as innocent as she seems now when her creds are on the line."

"And neither of you bosh'tets can tell when I'm bluffing" Tali said smugly., grabbing her drink and poking a straw in it.

"Hmmm, I think we're going to have a lot of fun tonight, you two." Six walked back to the sofa, popped the cap off of a beer and started shuffling the cards. "Just for the record; I haven't lost a game of Poker since I was a Chief Petty Officer."

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Author's Note:

So, that's my first attempt at writing Tali's interest in Six. Feedback on this chapter would be very appreciated, as the romance for this story is going to be my biggest challenge.

I was thinking of including the whole Poker game in this chapter, but I didn't want the chapter to be too long. I'm working on the next chapter now; hopefully I'll get it up in a couple weeks.

Thanks to everyone that continually messages me and writes reviews with feedback; it helps remind me that I need to focus on this story more. Suggestions are always welcomed, regardless of how small they may be.

Because I'll be getting in Tali and Six's romance now, I'd like more suggestions on his name. It may not be perfect, but I don't think she should keep calling him "Six" from now on. It just seems corny.

Thanks again, everyone!

Revisions:

As one reviewer so accurately pointed out, Noble Six should not have been a sergeant at any point in his military career. Since he is a member of the Navy, the equivalent rank would be a type of Petty Officer, so I changed the rank he states at the end of the chapter to Chief Petty Officer.

12. Conversations

"Alright Turian, I'll see your 50 creds and raise you another 100" the Spartan spouted in frustration, throwing the credit chits onto the table. The pile of chits in front of Garrus and Tali had been growing after almost every single hand, while Six was watching his own money disappear as fast as the beer the three had been drinking. Empty bottles littered the room, two equally large piles next to both Garrus and Six. Even Tali had knocked back more than anyone would have expected from her.

"You Humans just never learn, do you?" asked Garrus snidely, as he laughed when seeing the Lieutenant's face get beat red. "Didn't you say something like 'I haven't lost a game of Poker since I was a Chief Petty Officer'?" I wouldn't have thought you even knew how to place this game, Six."

"Laugh it up, Vakarian. Oh, and you!" Six pointed to the Quarian giggling on the sofa next to him. "Don't think I forgot about you. You may have the best Poker face here, but I'm going to get all my creds back from you and then spend it all on myself. You won't be getting any more fancy Omni-tools from me!"

Tali, who normally would very likely apologize profusely at that statement, only laughed it off in her buzzed and proud state. "Then it's a good thing you already go this one for me; I don't need another one for years now. Thanks again, Six. This new Omni-tool will make it so much easier for me to count all the creds I won from you!" She raised her beer to him, and then finished off yet another bottle of the Quarian beer that Garrus got for her. At the rate the three were going, they would all be under the table before someone lost the game.

"Hmph. You two are lucky I'm in such a nice mood" Six sputtered out, as he reached for his drink. "Alright Garrus, let's see the last card."

Garrus nodded as he took a sip from his beer, throwing the last card on the table. It was the King of Hearts. "Looks like we might have some big hands here" Garrus said, smirking at Six as he did. And he was right; the other four cards on the table were the Ace of Spades, Queen of Hearts, Jack of Clubs, and Nine of Hearts. More than one of them could have quite the hand.

The Spartan took a quick look at his own cards again; the Seven of Hearts and Ace of Hearts. Not only did he hold a flush, but also had the highest ranked card, the Ace, if either Garrus or Tali also had two suited cards of Hearts. He could barely contain the smile that tried to creep onto his face. "Alright Tali, it's your bet."

"Ok, I'll raise it another 100 credits." She took another sip through her straw, and placed yet another credit chit in the pile. "I'm not worried about you two beating me."

"I didn't know Quarrians were such avid gamblers, Tali. You'll have to tell us more about it sometime. But that still comes after the immune system talk. I'm still waiting on that one." Garrus smiled at her, taking a gulp from his beer with a cocky grin.

"And I can still go get my shotgun" she answered.

"Hah! That never gets old, does it? Alright Tali, I can't let you walk away with this pot, so I'll see your 100, and raise you another 200. Still in the game, Zorah?"

Tali started to reach into her pocket to match the Turian, but stopped halfway. Apparently, even after drinking some beers, Tali could still exercise an appropriate level of self-control. "Ummm, actuallyâ€¦ I fold." She dropped her cards on the table, clearly upset over Garrus' aggressive playing style.

"Looks like it's just you and me, Six. Are you sure you don't want to just let me win? We all know I'm going to anyways."

"So that's how it's going to be Garrus? Alright, I'll play along. But let's make this more interesting. I'll match your bet, but the loser of this hand has to call it a night. And to make it really fun, the loser also has to drink a beer from the other's stash."

Garrus was surprised by the offer, but didn't seem to mind. "So, the loser has to get sick for the next few days? I'm game, since I already know I'm going to win this. You're on, Six."

"You two are complete fools. Whoever has to drink that beer will be in the infirmary for the entire night. I've already had to drag Shepard out of Flux once, I'm not helping whoever loses this game." Tali seemed to be sharp on the conversation, as her voice sounded more concerned than one would expect after a night of drinking.

"Don't worry Tali, we'll both be fine. I've got enough augmentation that I don't have to worry about it, and Garrus here is so convinced he'll win that we don't need to be worried about him." Six shot a look of sarcasm at his Turian friend, only to be met with one in return. "Besides, I bet Garrus always wanted to learn what a real beer tastes like."

The two laughed a bit, and then Garrus threw his cards on the table. A Ten and a Five. "That, Lieutenant, is a Straight King High. So I'll just be taking these credit chits while you can drink some fine Palaven Ale." Garrus reached for a bottle from the box by his side, and held it out for the Spartan to take. He only got a smile in return.

"That's usually a pretty good hand, Garrus. But, I forgot; is this any better?" Six threw his two cards down, and it only took Garrus a moment to notice they were both Hearts. "Wait, I remember now, a flush does beat a straight! Read 'em and weep Turian! Those creds are mine!" The drunk Spartan jumped up from his chair, proceeding to strut around his cabin several times shouting before sitting down next to Garrus, who was holding his head in his hands. "Here, Garrus. This is the best Human beer you'll ever taste. And if we play again, it won't be the last."

Garrus took the bottle and slammed the drink in a matter of seconds. Without even saying goodnight, the Turian got up, waved his hands in frustration at Six and Tali, and simply walked towards the door. "I'll see you both tomorrow. You'll probably find me in the med bay after I realize how stupid it was to drink that beer." He walked out

the door quickly, and left Six and Tali alone to clean up the mess.

After sitting for a few moments silently, Tali decided to speak. "You know Six, we don't have to play anymore. I'd be fine just relaxing for a little bit instead. I think I've had enough of Garrus' idea of a good Quarian beer for tonight." Even while she said that, Tali took another sip of her beer. She did hiccup, though.

"Heh, what makes you think I should let you off so easy? I just beat Garrus in one hand." He chuckled a little, but started grabbing all the cards to show he was only joking. "That's a good idea Tali. I could use a break from the drinks and bragging. If you don't mind, thoughâ€¦" He looked up right at her while he was still cleaning the mess on the table up. "I'd like to know more about your people. You know, Quarians. That's not rude to ask, right?"

Tali was more than surprised at his question. _'Why would he want to know about Quarians?'_ She asked herself. She was happy to answer anyways. "Of course, Six. I'd love to. I'm justâ€¦ surprised you want to know about us. I know a little about where you came from, and I wouldn't think you would want to know anything about aliens."

"Don't be. The Quarians never did anything to me. Do you want to sit in front of the window? Kasumi got a couple great chairs for me to look out at the stairs with."

"That sounds nice, Six" she answered. The two walked around the table and sat down in front of the window, each in their own chair. "What do you want to know about?"

"I guessâ€¦ everything really. I don't really know anything about Quarians. I've heard a little about the Migrant Fleet, but I don't know much else. Do you want to tell me about that?"

Tali smiled behind her mask. Even if she was tired and tipsy, she was always happy to talk about the Fleet. "I'd like thatâ€¦ The Migrant Fleet is home to almost all Quarians in the galaxy; the only other Quarians are those on their Pilgrimage. There are more than 17 million of us in the Fleet, spread across 50,000 ships. I know it doesn't sound like much for an entire race, but it has to do with the war with the Geth. When they drove us from our homeworld and colonies, only those of us that were able to escape on ships were able to survive. Even with thousands of military and commercial craft evacuating all the people they could fit, billions had to be left behind. And they wereâ€¦ killed by the Geth. Children, the elderlyâ€¦ everyone." She trailed off as her emotions got the better of her in her intoxicated state.

The Lieutenant knew what it felt like to see people left behind on a planet; all too well, in fact. The thought of leaving so many people behind on Reach was something that still nagged at him every day. "I'm sorry Tali. I didn't mean to bring something like this up."

"It's alright. No Quarian alive now lived through it. We're all used to living in the Fleet. The war with the Geth is really just a story to us now. We all want to go home, but we know it can't happen. Not without another war. And we can't afford one without somewhere for our civilians to be sheltered andâ€¦"

"And that's the reason you want to go home. It's never easy, is it?"

"Noâ€| but you wanted to know about the Fleet, not our history."

"Well, I did say _everything_" he snickered. He paid close attention to her reaction; as soon as the words left his mouth, Six was worried it was the wrong time for a joke. He was happy to hear Tali laugh, if just a bit.

"I guess so. As for living in the Fleet now, it isn't easy. Not compared to what the rest of the galaxy is like, at least. Growing up, I didn't think anything of how we live. We have very little contact with the rest of the galaxy; other than the Admiralty Board's communications with cluster governments regarding us passing through, we try to be as independent as possible. It's not that we aren't friendly, but we keep a very delicate balance to ensure our survival. We don't want to resort to asking anyone for aid, when it likely won't come."

"Is the Admiralty Board your government?"

"Yes. Well, it's one of the two political powers in the Fleet. The Admiralty Board consists of five members; my father is the senior Admiral on the board andâ€|"

"Wait a second Tali; are you telling me you're some kind of Quarian Royal family member? If the Admirals lead the Fleetâ€|"

"Heh, it's nothing so fancy. The Admirals are elected, and family is left out of decisions as much as possible. I probably had some advantages growing up, but that would have been all. And it was never anything so important that I remember. Even Admirals that have their own agendas realize that they hold the survival of our people in their decisions. It's a good way to keep them in check; for the most part. The other branch of our government is the Conclave; each ship has a representative in it, and they represent the civilians of the Fleet."

"How do they agree on anything when there are 50,000 representatives? And where do they even meet?"

"It's not as complicated as it sounds. They never actually meet in-person; obviously that wouldn't work. Decisions are made by voting on questions through ship-wide communications. The Conclave makes decisions on a much broader scale than the Admirals. For example, the Conclave makes decisions on where the Fleet is headed. Unclaimed systems with element zero and water supplies are the most sought. After the destination is ruled by the Conclave, the Admirals are assigned to decide a route. The safest ones are usually chosen; mercenary and pirate activity is avoided. Even though almost every ship is armed to defend itself in some way, we only have a few hundred real warships. Pirates don't like attacking the Fleet much, but we have to be careful. A few heavily armed pirate frigates could raid some of the more vulnerable ships and escape before the Heavy Fleet could respond."

"It sounds like the Fleet is more of a military convoy than a group

of civilian ships."

"In some ways, you're right. When we first fled from our homeworld, the survivors were under martial law. Technically, the Fleet is still under martial law. Even now, we have to keep a strict control on what goes on in the Fleet. Quarrians have had to surrender many of the civil liberties the races in Council space take for granted. Space is very limited for us, and most of the time families share a single space. They are also limited to one child; we have to keep our population at zero growth. Otherwise, we might not be able to feed everyone. If we have a decline in our population, the Conclave will offer incentives to families to have more children."

"I guess the Quarrians don't want to have their numbers go down at all just as much as you need to keep from growing. It doesn't sound like you get to have much fun, Taliâ€¦"

"It's not as serious as I'm making it out to be. We have to work very hard, but even we know that you have to relax. Spending every day of your life would burn even the toughest of us out. Since we spend all our time on ships, we have become very social with each other. Each ship's crew is like a family, and we all make sure we're happy. Every night, we spend time telling stories to each other. A ship's captain usually will lead, but anyone who is crew of the ship is free to speak. We like to get involved with each other."

"So, you become crew on a ship after your Pilgrimage, right? That's what your last name is, isn't it?"

"Not like Human last names, but I get what you mean. After my Pilgrimage, I joined the Neema, so I added vas Neema to my name. My clan name is Zorah. That's the same name my father has. That's closest to a Human's last name. For very formal occasions, I'd likely introduce myself with my birth ship's name as well, the Rayya. And since I am explaining this all to the representative of another galaxyâ€¦" Tali stood up, drink in hand, and proceeded to formally introduce herself to the Spartan. "Tali'Zorah vas Neema nar Rayya." She fell back into her chair, leaving Six to laugh at her. "I'm making a fool of myself, aren't I?"

"Only a little bit, Tali. But you're telling me a lot about Quarrians, and I'm glad I know that much more about you. It's been fun." He thought to himself for a momentâ€¦ _'Fun. Now that's something I haven't had for a long time.'_ What surprised him the most was that he noticed it. "I hope you and Garrus had some fun tonight. I'm sure he'll yell at me tomorrow, but I think he was enjoying himself."

"Don't worry, Six. Garrus may pout like an Asari when he loses a game, but he'll admit he lost. As long as he isn't dead in the morning from drinking your beerâ€¦. I can't believe he did that. Even for him that's stupid. He's a Turian of his word, if nothing else."

"You don't actually think that will hurt him, do you?" He asked with some concern in his voice; did he actually just kill the first friend he made in this galaxy?

"Heh, no, not really. I'm sure he'll be sick tomorrow, and that he'll be hiding in the forward battery all day. But the worst thing you

have to worry about is Doctor Chakwas coming to yell at you. She doesn't mind yelling at anyone she's mad with."

"Yea, I've gotten the impression that the Doctor will yell at anyone if she thinks she needs to. I bet even the Commander isn't safe from her."

"No, not even Shepard" Tali giggled. "During a mission on the Citadel once, Shepard and Garrus were chasing some mercenaries on foot. The criminals got into a sky car, and Shepard jumped on and tried to climb in after them. They flipped the car over and he went flying! He broke a few ribs, and Chakwas yelled at him for 10 minutes because he was 'being brash and foolish.' We were all laughing about it for weeks."

"It seems like the crew on the first Normandy were a lot friendlier than they are now. What happened?"

Tali shook her head in frustration and anger, thinking about the people she was now surrounded by. "This is a Cerberus ship, that's what happened. You already know they don't like anyone that isn't Human. And the team Shepard has nowâ€¦ he had to go looking for them and ask them to join. On the first Normandy, everyone on his team asked to help; we all wanted to help him track Saren down." She stopped for a moment, thinking over everything she has just said. "Listen to me, complaining about the people who saved my life. Most of them are nice, and really want to help stop the Collectors. Ken and Gabby in engineering both left the Alliance because they believed Shepard about the Reapers. And Jokerâ€¦ well he just wants to fly the Normandy. But he would follow Shepard anywhere. Mordin is happy working in the lab, Grunt is eager just to shoot thingsâ€¦"

"But then we have Mirandaâ€¦"

"Hmph, yes. _Her_. It's not just the Cerberus part of her that bugs me; she's up to something. The day after you rescued me on Haestrom, I found new surveillance bugs around my station. I don't think anyone else on the ship would have planted them. She's going to be trouble at some point." Tali turned to look at Six before speaking again. "Thanks for listening to me, Six. I was supposed to be telling you about Quarrians, and instead you have to hear me babble about what I don't like on the Normandy. But you never stopped me."

He smiled at her, patting her on the shoulder gently. "Don't worry, Tali. Everyone needs to vent sometimes. I'm glad I could help. I didn't have many people to talk with like this when I was back home, so it's a nice change. Sorry if I'm no good at it."

"No, you have been really great. And not just now, but ever since we met. You risked your life for me on Haestrom, before you had even met me. You saved me from that mercenary on Illium, too. Garrus and Shepard are the only real friends I have in this galaxy, butâ€¦ I think I'm going to have three soon."

She raised her drink to him, waiting for a toast. Six was more than happy to accept. They clinked their glasses together, both smiling and taking a gulp. Well, Six assumed she was smiling.

"But I haven't asked you anything yet. If you don't mind telling me, what was it like in your galaxy?"

"Well, that's a more complicated question than you think Tali. The last few years have been better, and I've actually had time to do some things I wanted to. But the first 23 years of my life were filled with nothing but fightingâ€¦ it's a long story, and it's late. Why don't I tell you about it another time?" He tried as hard as he could to make it seem like he was only tired, but Six had a feeling Tali knew better.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to make you think about something bad, or rememberâ€¦."

"You didn't do anything wrong, Tali. Let's just talk about it laterâ€¦. I bet you're getting pretty tired now anyways. I promise I'll tell you more, but justâ€¦ not now."

He stood up silently, hoping Tali would do the same. As happy as he was to be talking with her, Six simply wasn't ready to talk about himself on the same level Tali just did. He realized how hypocritical it must seem, but it didn't change his mind. He was relieved to see Tali stand up, simply nodding at him as she walked towards the cabin door.

"Do you want me to help you clean this mess up? I don't want you to think I'm ungrateful for having us in your cabinâ€¦"

"Nah, don't worry about it Tali. I'll get everything myself."

"Alright, Six. It was really fun spending time with you and Garrus tonight, Six. I hope we can do it again sometime. Maybe without all the drinking, though." She laughed a little, the alcohol still flowing through her. "You know, I get really bored being alone in engineering most of the time. Maybe you and Garrus could come visit me sometimes?"

"I think Iâ€¦ err, we, can do that Tali. Have a nice night, and I'll see you in the morning." They both nodded to each other, and then Tali turned around to head into the elevator for her bed in engineering.

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"It looks like your night of fun was a success, Lieutenant." Leliana spoke through his armor's external speakers, seemingly begging for attention. After being stuck in it for the past few hours, she was eager to get out and speak with Six.

"I guess you'd like to talk about it?" he asked, as he walked towards his armor stand to remove her memory chip. He placed her on her usual spot at the center table. "I think it was a good idea spending some time with the two of them."

"Yes, but you could've made less of a mess with the place" she said, looking at the table around her. Empty beer bottles and snacks filled at area; not what you would expect from a Spartan. "I think Kasumi would be shocked to see what you've done with all her furniture."

"Heh, probably. But she doesn't have to know about it. I'll clean everything up now, anyways." He was walking around the room as he talked to Leliana, picking up trash and tossing it in the room's garbage chute. "You know I'm new to this 'hanging out' thing Leliana; how do you think I did?"

"Well Lieutenant, you put Garrus in the infirmary, and Tali asked you to visit her in engineering. I'd say that's what friends do" she said with a smile. "But I don't think Garrus will be happy to see you, tomorrow. I accessed the extranet when he lost that hand, and Turians and Humans drinking together is a well-documented occurrence. Because of the lingering animosity between the two races, members from each will often challenge each other, just like you and Garrus, to drink what they know will harm them. These are usually hostile, unlike tonight, and more alcohol is often consumed, yet they usually only result in mild sickness. I expect Garrus will be fine."

"I have a feeling I'll be drinking one of those Turian ales before it's all said and done. What about Tali? You don't think I asked her about too much, right? I didn't want to pry."

Leliana was always aware of Six's mood; after all, she spent almost every moment of her life since her 'birth' with the Lieutenant. While he asked about both Garrus and Tali, he now started to show a different emotion in his voice whenever it was about the Quarian. It didn't take the AI's advanced mind to notice; just the Human part of her. She smiled, realizing she was that much closer to getting him to open up. "She talked for a long time, Six. If she was uncomfortable talking about Quarians with you, I don't think you would have heard so much. I think she had a great time tonight. Well done, Lieutenant."

The Spartan smiled, if only a little so that Leliana wouldn't see. He was happy, thinking that he might actually find something good in this new galaxy. His new friends were a good start. "Do you think I came off as selfish when I told her I didn't want to talk about me? Like you said, she told me a lot about herself and Quarians, and then I basically just told her to leave."

"I have no doubt she is more than smart enough to realize you are hiding something, Lieutenant" she said, looking right into his eyes. A few moments without response told the AI she wasn't getting anywhere with that. "But I also think she's nice enough not to pry; for now, at least. When the two of you get to know each other more, I think you'll be telling her what's wrong. Tali doesn't seem like someone to ignore her friends."

"But until then, I'm going to enjoy my privacy Leliana" he said, adding some seriousness to his tone. "You know I don't like talking about it, so let's just give it a rest for a while, ok?" His sudden outburst caused Leliana to pause, dipping her head and turning her eyes in shame. Her constant prying into the Lieutenant's past got her in trouble this time.

"I'm sorry, Six" she said quietly.

"I'm going to sleep, Leliana. Please wake me up in the morning." Without saying another word, Six walked to his bed, hit the lights and dropped into bed. Between Tali's questioning and Leliana's

nosiness, thoughts of that damned planet flooded through the Spartan's mind. Those he met there, and those he lost there.

He was going to have a rough night.

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He had just landed at Olympic Tower. The area was safe, for the moment, and he was just coming through the doorway into where the rest of Noble Team was waiting. He walked in to find Carter and Emile idling about, Jun looking out at the city, and Kat working on a damaged comm unit. They all knew about Jorge, and it showed. Not to mention the burning city they were attempting to save.

"_Look at this placeâ€¦ it used to be the crown jewel of Reach. Not anymore, that's for sure" said Jun, as he continued to scan the area. He turned when he heard Six come in. "Hey, good to see you made it Six. Glad you could take care of those Banshees for us." Jun smiled, nodding up for Six to look at the ceiling. They both laughed when he saw a broken Banshee, hanging in some cables._

"_It was fun, Jun. Maybe if you wouldn't hide so far off all the time, you could help."_

"_Glad to have you back, Lieutenant. Didn't seem right with you gone" Carter said, walking over to him and Jun._

"_Yea, it's one big family reunion, isn't it?" Emile said, his attitude ever prevalent in his voice. _

Six reached into his pocket, pulling Jorge's clean dog tags from it. He held them out for Carter to take, but he was interrupted before he could say anything.

"_You should keep 'em Six. He gave them to you."_

_Carter looked at Emile, then back to Six and nodded. The Lieutenant tucked them away, secretly happy to have them as a reminder. _

Jun looked over at Six briefly, shrugging a bit before speaking. "Hmph, Jorge always said he would never leave Reach willingly."

"_Hah hah hah. The big guy always was a bit sentimental. Guess he got what he wished forâ€¦" said Emile. _

"_He gave his life for us, and he thought he just saved the planet" Carter said sternly. "We should all be so lucky when we go. Carter walked over to the shattered window by Jun, while Six stood next to Kat. She looked back up at him, smiling a little before turning back to work on the comm unit. _

"_Commander, is that true what we heard about Gauntlet, Red, and Echo Teams being assigned to civilian evac ops? It doesn't sound good." Jun set his binoculars down, looking at Carter. _

_Carter didn't have to think twice about who was responsible to learning of those teams' redeployment. "Those are senior level

communiques Lieutenant-Commander!"_

Kat just kept working, shrugging a bit. "I heard what I heard, sir. Jun's point is, why assign Spartans to defensive deployments?"

"_Get me my link to SATCOM, Kat. Now."_

"_Chasing it, Carter. This console has more shrapnel and plasma damage in it than transceivers. You'll be lucky if you can call me with itâ€| and you didn't answer my question."_

"_What, do you want to know if we're losing?"_

"_We all know we're losing. We want to know if we've lost."

_

Before he had to answer Kat, the radio sprang to life, if only barely. And they were rewarded with a static ridden transmission the Colonel.

"_It's Colonel Holland, he's hailing us. What the hell is he doing on an open channel?" Kat snapped._

"_Let's hear it, Kat."_

"â€|_near the southwest quadrant of the city, over? Sierra Two-Five-Nine, if you are receiving, I am authorizing override of radio security protocols to link with this channel."_

"_How long do I get a secure link, Kat?"_

"_You don't."_

"_Can they trace it?"_

"_I sure as hell could."_

Kat held the ear piece out behind her, not even turning to look at Carter. "Make it quick, Carter."

Jun was back to watching the area now, eager to keep an eye out for any increase in Covenant activity. He snapped his attention to something in the south. "We've got a lot of Covenant movement over there. Multiple vehicles are vacating the areaâ€| and they're in a big hurry!"

Emile stood up, his interest piqued. "How the hell often do we see Covenant retreating for no damn reason?"

"_We don't" said Kat, who looked down at her datapad. "Radiation flare, and it's big! Forty million roentgens!"_

"_I just lost Holland, Kat. What the hell is going on here?" asked Carter._

"_Atomic excitement scrambled the signal. It's at ninety million now! Watch out!"_

_Before anyone could respond, they were thrown to the ground from a

shockwave. Covenant ships started glassing the area, air being forced into the room from incredible pressure. _

"_Time to go people! Let's move!" Carter yelled, taking Emile and Jun with him towards the second elevator in the room._

_Kat was crawling on the ground, looking for her helmet after being stunned from the glassing. Her eyes were struggling to adjust from the flash, but she felt a hand grab her by the shoulder. She just went with it, knowing that it was helping. After running blindly for a bit, she was stopped and heard the door of an elevator close by her. Her sight returning, she squinted to see Six standing in front of her. He reached out, holding her helmet. She smiled, taking it and replacing it on her head. The Lieutenant hit the elevator button, sending them down to the ground. _

"_Is this your first glassing?" asked Kat._

"_Yeaâ€¦| can't say I'm enjoying it, either" Six joked._

"_Mine too. I'd prefer not to see this again. Don't worry, though. I'll find us somewhere to go." She fiddled with her datapad a bit, finding a suitable location quickly. "There's a fallout bunker on sublevel two. It's straight out the door when we reach the floor. Commander, you copy?"_

"_Affirmative, we'll see you there."_

"_Did you receive the message from Holland?" she asked. _

"_We're being redeployed to Sword Base as soon as the glassing is finished."_

"_Sword?" yelled Jun. "The Covenant own it now! What are they sending us back there for?"_

"_Command wants us for a torch and burn op. We need to ensure that Dr. Halsey's excavation data doesn't fall into the Covenants' hands." Carter's elevator reached the sublevel, and the three in it sprinted out towards the open blast doors in front of them. _

_Kat and Six felt the elevator come to a halt, and the door opened. Six could see the others ahead of them, and the two quickly followed. Six glanced at his motion tracker too late, and only started to turn to Kat when she was speaking. His warning never left his mouth.

_

"_Where the hell does he get off calling a demolition op on a Priority One-" _

_He heard the shot just as he saw Kat out of the corner of his eye. The round went clean through, and into the concrete they stood on. A small cloud of dust flew up, covering Kat's armor as she fell towards the ground. Six caught her before she hit the floor, looking down at her motionless body. The enraged Spartan grabbed Kat's worn pistol, looking up at the Field Marshall wielding the Needle Rifle. He heard the others open fire with assault rifles, peppering the Phantom and its occupant with inaccurate shots. Six fired the pistol, aiming as carefully as he ever had. He watched in satisfaction as his shots dropped the Elite's shields, but was shaken when only one bullet hit

his target's armor before the clip popped. _

_He could hear voices behind him, some familiar, and some new. They were all yelling something or another. He just ignored them. He kept looking up at the Phantom, only to see it turn away and quickly flee. He picked Kat up, and dragged her by her shoulders into the bunker that was only meters behind him. Six sat down, staring at Kat, as the blast doors closed in front of him. All he could do was stare.

_

_The area around him became muddy, and he was no longer in New Alexandria. He could hear whispers around him, but couldn't understand them at first. A few moments later, he heard a single voice call to him, clear and peacefully. _

"_Sixâ€¦|"_

He turned around, seeing a cloudy figure before him. He slowly saw her standing, her damaged and bloodied helmet in her hand, but her face was unharmed. He reached out, trying to touch her, but was stopped before he made it. She raised her hand, offering a smile.

"_It wasn't your fault."_

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Six awoke, harshly and quickly. He was panting, and sweat covered his face. He swung his legs over the edge of his bed, sitting up and slowing his breathing. He looked at his clock, only to see he still had a few hours before he should be up. His dreams had been haunting him for five years, and their regular occurrence hadn't made them any less terrible. But after the mission on Haestrom, these were the first times that she had spoken to him. Maybe he was getting better; or maybe he was going crazy. Six didn't know, but tried not to dwell on it. He instead got up and got a glass of water.

Leliana was waiting for him, her normal look of concern over her face. She knew he had been having nightmares ever since he left Reach, but he had still not told her what exactly they were about. She had a good guess, but wanted to know more. She always wanted to know more. Sadly, the Spartan was very selective about opening up. His new friendships with Tali and Garrus proved he wanted to tell someone, even if he didn't realize it yet.

"Having trouble sleeping?" She asked warmly.

"What gave you that idea?" He snapped, trying to hide his other emotions with anger. He still wasn't happy with her from earlier, but he was still nice enough to walk over and sit down in front of her. "Go ahead, ask away."

"I don't want to bother you, Lieutenant. I'm only trying to help."

"Ok, I get it. So ask away."

"You've been having these dreams ever since Reach, but you haven't

told anyone what they are about."

"They're about Reach."

"I know thatâ€¦ but what are they really? And don't just tell me 'the war' or something. Be honest with me Six. I'm here for you."

He took a deep breath, tilting his head down into his hands so he didn't have to look at Leliana. She was getting better at opening him up, and tonight was her best yet. Maybe he just needed to vent a little and she'd let him be for a while. "They're about them. They're always about themâ€¦"

"Who?"

"Do you really need to ask?"

"I just wanted to make sure we were together."

"Hmph. Well, there you have it Leliana. Anything else?"

"Yesâ€¦ you're acting different now. Ever since we met, you wouldn't tell me a thing about this. But since we got here, you've told me about a lot. Something changed."

Damn, she was smart. He went this far, no reason to stop now. "The dream I had tonightâ€¦ it was about when she died. But it was different this time; I've seen her in my dreams before. This time, she spoke to me. Sheâ€¦ tried to comfort me. I didn't tell you this either butâ€¦ when we were on Haestrom, I got dazed for a few seconds, and I saw her then. She tried to comfort me then, too."

"Don't you think she would, if she could speak to you Six? I don't think she'd want you to beat yourself up over what happened. You did so much during the war, for so many people. You weren't going to save everyone."

"You keep saying that, like I should just accept their deaths as if they're ok."

"No, but you do need to accept that you did everything you could. You have to find strength in it, Six. They all would have wanted you to. And nowâ€¦ now you have someone else to look after. You can focus on Garrus and Tali now."

He smiled at the thought, even if it was forced. "Yea, I guess I do. But do you think the rest is really so easy? I sure don't."

"I didn't say it was easy. But it's the truth, and it's simple. You just have to get used to it."

The Spartan looked back up to her, seeing her familiar smile looking at him. "I'll work on it Leliana. Thanks. And I'm sorry I yelled at you earlier."

"It's better than you ignoring my help, Lieutenant. It's all part of dealing with this. I just hope you don't plan on yelling moreâ€¦" she said with a wink, laughing just a little to help ease the tension, without treating it so casually. "I think you should get some sleep

now; since you put Garrus in the infirmary, I have a feeling the Commander will be bringing you along on a mission."

"That's probably a good idea. Thanks for the talk, Leliana. I know I don't always make it clear, but I'm glad you're with me. You're just about the only one who helps me keep my head on straight."

She just smiled as usual, the same warm smile that was finally helping the Lieutenant. "I'm always here, Six. Have a good night."

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Author's Note:

Well, what did you think? I'm really getting started on the romance now, and I won't pretend I'm an expert on the subject. I'll be looking to several of the Tali/Shepard fanfics that I think are the most well-written. Razor's Edge and Awakening stand out to me; anyone interested in purely Mass Effect reads, check those two out.

As for the dreams, I planned on having these in the story, even before they were introduced in Mass Effect 3. Obviously, having Kat appear to Six earlier in the story (Chapter 5, I think?) was part of this. I really want this in the story, but they won't be coming up very often. So if you didn't like the ME3 dreams, or this one, you won't have to read through them too often.

Besides all that, just let me know what you think. I love the praise, of course, but criticism that is useful is very appreciated. I likely won't improve the story if I don't know what everyone wants.

For the Lieutenant's name, I have made a decision. I won't be revealing it too soon; I don't see him telling Tali until they become much closer. It will probably be after her trial, but who knows. I want the important events of Mass Effect in the story, but because it's Six and Tali, not Shepard and Tali, I'll be changing them around a bit.

A special thanks to Infinite Freedom, Leige Lord, Simplywaters, Rydan Fall, Advice Puppy, and M4GIC OR4NGEZ for continuing to message me with comments!

13. Zorya

Author's Note:

I've noticed a lot of comments over the course of the chapter reviews pertaining to Leliana, and Tali being in the dark on her existence. I realize I haven't discussed it much, and that has been intentional. I also remember that Shepard was to talk to Tali, but this chapter will be taking that in a new direction. Just a reminder: only a few people on the Normandy know about Leliana, and they can all be trusted to keep her unknown. She'll be revealed in a more meaningful way than "Garrus let the cat out of the bag."

Tali and Six can't have a relationship without some bumps in the road, and Leliana certainly won't be met with joy. I won't go into

detail, mainly because I simply haven't worked out the details yet. This problem will be resolved, more or less, before the assault on the Collector Base. I don't like giving out plot details, but don't worry; Tali and Six **will** find happiness together. As our favorite Quarian once stated "Nothing stands between us now." The "now" is the real surprise for you all.

Regarding a loyalty mission for Six: I realize that including the Ardent Prayer would be realistic, considering its "destruction" via Slipspace teleportation. But, I really want to leave as much Halo tech out as possible. The story is meant to be about Mass Effect, simply with Noble Six as the protagonist. And on top of that, would Jorge be alive? What does Shepard do with all that Halo tech? What about the other Covenant troops on the ship? It's just not the direction I want to take. I have a very good idea (I personally think) for the Lieutenant's loyalty mission; remember, it may be the Mass Effect universe, but the planets are still the same in the galaxy.

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To: Cerberus Command

From: Lazarus Cell

Subject: Spartan-B312 "Noble Six"

Illusive Man,

As per your request, monitoring of the Normandy's new, and by far most unique, crew member has been underway since his arrival. All attempts to install additional monitoring devices within subject's living quarters have been met by almost immediate deactivation when subject's personal AI is back within the area. Further tampering within the area while subject is deployed on missions will likely not create different, more useful results. The ability of said AI, based on a limited amount of data, is far more advanced than we even optimistically guessed. Hands-on study is highly recommended; making its capture a priority is highly recommended.

Because of the failed attempts at concealed monitoring, a more hands-on observation based approach has been taken. Subject has been surprisingly willing to cooperate with certain members of the squad; Archangel and the Machinist seem to be becoming friends with him, and additionally, the Commander has seemingly gained his respect. Said friendships are the most promising ways of luring subject into Cerberus' long-term goals. While the study of the AI is what should be Cerberus' number one priority, this is extremely unlikely if subject is not cooperative with us. Long-term goals of bringing subject into Cerberus' service should consider the use of manipulating his feelings regarding said friends. It has become apparent during the previous mission to recruit the Assassin that subject has strong emotions tied with those he works with; namely, those that can be seen as ones he "feels responsible" for. If any of these individuals are in direct danger, subject has proven his immediate, almost uncontrolled response.

Regarding standing orders to inform on any new combat abilities

observed, subject has once again, like his AI, proven that we greatly underestimated him. Speed, strength, endurance, aim, and virtually every other worthwhile combat ability have been shown to be on a much higher plane than even Cerberus' own advanced research projects. The armor's abilities have demonstrated their incredible capabilities as well. Subject's shields are based on a completely different technology than ours, as they have the ability to deflect all forms of fire within their power. Directed energy weapons are met as if they were kinetic weapons. Recommend investigation.

Observation of the subject will continue for the time being; an immediate course of action allowing Cerberus to reach its goals has not presented itself.

Operative Lawson

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"Lieutenant, the only reason that I'm not going to yell at you any longer is because I have no doubt in my mind that Garrus did this to himself just as much as you did" said Dr. Chakwas. She had been lecturing him for a good five minutes now, and it seemed she felt she made her point. "I don't think Garrus was in any real danger, but I'm still glad that he came to see me before he decided sleeping on it. He'd probably be stuck in here for days if I hadn't gotten the proper medicine in him."

"Ugghh, is that you, Six?" the Turian asked groggily as he clutched his stomach. Garrus was laying on one of the beds in the infirmary, and still hadn't moved since he came in last night. "I don't think playing Poker with you was a good ideaâ€|"

"Hey, you brought this on yourself Garrus. Your ego got the best of you, buddy. Heh" laughed the Spartan, happily amused now that he knew Garrus was going to be fine soon. "I don't think you'll be coming along for any missions today, though. Tali and I will let you know about all the fun you missed."

"Very funny, Sixâ€| ugh."

"Doctor, is there anything else you'd like from me?" Six asked.

"Only to promise me you won't do this again. If nothing else Lieutenant, the medicine I have to keep around for Garrus and Tali is unique to them, and therefore much more expensive. Look at it as keeping the mission on budget."

"I'll see what I can do, ma'am. I'll pay you back next time, if it comes to that."

The Doctor simply gave him a slight look of discontent, but she knew he was only trying to hide behind his humor. He wasn't going to pull something like this again. "Very well, Lieutenant. Have a safe mission with the Commander. I believe he wants you to meet him and Tali upstairs in the Communications Room. I believe we're headed to Zorya to find the final potential team member. Why don't you go see what it's all about?"

"Sure, I'll go up there now. Have a good day, Doctor" he said, waving and walking back out the med bay door. He skipped breakfast and walked right into the elevator to take him up to the CIC. The quick ride ended, and Six looked out at the CIC as the door opened. The yeoman, Kelly Chambers, was hard at work at her usual station. Six still hadn't really spent any time talking to her, but from what Garrus and Tali told him, he would need a good deal of time devoted to the first conversation.

Rather than get caught in a conversation with the chatty yeoman, he quietly snuck around the corner into the science lab. He found Mordin hard at work, analyzing what was likely data from the previous missions. The Professor didn't bother to look up at the Spartan, so Six assumed he had nothing to say. Before he got into the next room, however, he was stopped by the Salarian.

"Lieutenant! Excellent timing. Waiting on data to be analyzed by EDI. Good down time for conversation. Would like to ask you a few questions, if you don't mind?"

Six walked over to the table Mordin was working on, putting his hands down on it. "Sure, Professor. What do you need?"

"Would like to know if you're settling in well. Am aware of your unique circumstances. Could be very traumatizing for average Human. Humans are very emotional creatures, expect you are no different."

"Well, that's a safe assumption, I guess. But I've been fine Professor. I think I'm going to settle in nicely on the Normandy. I might even be making some new friends."

"Yes, am aware of your growing relationships with Garrus and Tali'Zorah. Recommend them as stabilizers in your new environment. Also, no need to be modest in describing your relationships with them. Your care for them is obvious."

"I am ok, Mordin. Now, was there anything specific you wanted to talk about?"

"Yes, would like to know if you've experienced any difficulty eating, sleeping, or any other trouble that would not seem casual to you. Specifically, any difficulty adapting to new environment."

"Honestly? No, I've been fine, Mordin. Haven't gotten sick, I've slept well" He answered within the context of the question, but it was far from the truth. "It's as if I was back home."

"Hmm, glad to hear it. Would like a tissue sample within next month. Long-term effects of new environment should be examined. Negative effects could be problematic. Should get going to Communications Room. Shepard and Tali'Zorah are waiting for you. Will talk later."

With that, Mordin essentially went back to ignoring the Lieutenant, signaling the end of the conversation. Six just shrugged to himself, having already figuring out that this was just how Mordin was. He was happy to not answer any prying medical questions, anyways. He turned

around and made his way through the next door and into the Communication Room.

As he walked in, he was happy to see Tali waiting in the corner, with Shepard at the end of the table. He would've smiled at Tali, but like her, he was wearing his armor and hidden behind a mask. He nodded instead. "Commander, the Doctor said you wanted to see me?"

"Glad to see you aren't as hung-over as Garrus, Lieutenant. Tali told me about your little Poker game last night." Shepard crossed his arms, giving Six a small look of dissatisfaction.

"Well, sir, I just wanted to spend some time with Garrus and Tali, to get to know the crew. We probably had too many drinks, and the bet with Garrus of course was badâ€¦"

"Save it, Lieutenant" said Shepard, as he raised his hand to him. "No need for an apology. I'm sure Garrus did it to himself; more or less. And I'm glad to see you settling in on the Normandy. I know you've been through a lot, and I want you to be ready to fight. We're going to need all the help we can get. Just make sure you don't put Garrus in the infirmary before the mission against the Collectors. Understood?"

Shepard was surprisingly calm about it. If Six had done this with any of his previous commanding officers, he wouldn't expect anything less than being thrown in the brig. Normally, it would be seen as a sign of weakness, but something was different about Shepard. He was cool and approachable, but it was still clear he was in command.

"Yes sir. It won't happen again."

"Well, don't go and avoid having some fun because of this, Lieutenant. I couldn't get Tali to stop rambling on about how much fun she had last night with you and Garrus. I won't ruin my Chief Engineer's best chance at relaxing on the Normandy. Just make sure you're more careful with different types of beer." Shepard smiled a bit, just enough to come off as a regular person.

Before Six had a chance to answer, Tali decided to interject. "I didn't ramble, Shepard. I just said I had a nice time talking with Sixâ€¦ and Garrus, of course. We all had fun last night."

Six noticed Tali played with hands while she spoke, if only a little. Was it a sign? Maybe, but not much of one. He decided to brush it off. "I'm glad you had fun last night Tali. Once Garrus is back on his feet, we'll have to do it again soon." The Lieutenant, despite his newfound freedoms on the Normandy, was still a military officer at heart. He quickly steered the conversation back to Shepard. "But what did you want to see me for, Commander?"

"We're on our way to the Faia System in the Ismar Frontier. There, we'll find the planet Zorya. The Illusive Man has struck a deal with a mercenary, Zaeed Massani, who will be joining the team as its final member. We were supposed to meet him on Omega, but Zaeed had a previous commitment that required him to travel to the planet." Shepard tapped a few of the buttons on the center table's console, and schematics for some type of industrial building came up. "Eldfell-Ashland has a refinery on the planet, but it was taken hold of by the Blue Suns recently. Zaeed was contracted by the company to

liberate it, and began the mission before we met him on Omega."

"They hired a single mercenary to retake their refinery? He must be one hell of a soldier."

"From what his dossier says, that should be proven accurate. But Eldfell-Ashland didn't expect him to do this alone; Cerberus was also contracted to help liberate the refinery. That means we get the missions. Recruiting Zaeed is just part of this mission." Shepard pointed out an open area in the jungle surrounding the plant. "We'll land here; from that location, we're going to make our way to the main gate here. Tali will make sure we can get through any security measures we encounter."

"I'll do my best" she said.

"What do you want me to be doing during the mission, Commander?" The Spartan asked.

"Since we're short our normal sniper for this mission, Lieutenant," Shepard said with a bit of friendly mockery in his voice "I want you to fill that role. We'll be fighting through Blue Suns squads in the jungle, and we need a marksman. You'll still come with the whole team, but I don't want you running into the thick of the fight. That lone wolf stuff from Haestrom won't cut it this time, Six. It will be too easy to get separated in the terrain until we get inside the building."

"Got it, sir. Where are we supposed to be meeting this mercenary?"

"Here, at the main gate of the refinery" Shepard answered, pointing to a point on the map. "We'll make our way into the compound from there, and locate the Blue Suns' leader, Vido Santiago. We're supposed to capture him and bring him to Eldfell-Ashland for trial. They want to turn him into authorities on Illium; punishment there is much harsher than in Alliance space. I guess he really pissed them off."

"Heh, I don't blame them. Cutting into a company's profits can quickly turn them on you. Also, I want to ask about our priorities on this mission, Shepard." The Commander nodded to him. "Cerberus may have made a deal with this mercenary, but we also have one with Eldfell-Ashland. If we get into a situation where we have to choose, who are we going with?"

"Good question, Lieutenant. Normally I'd say Zaeed; he's too valuable to the mission. But, this refinery has a lot of innocent employees in it. If we have to leave Zaeed to save others, I won't hesitate to make the choice. Got it?"

"Absolutely sir. Let's hope it doesn't come to that. Is it just the three of us going on this mission?"

"We don't need to take the whole team, but I want a biotic on the mission as well. Miranda will be accompanying us; she's eager to see you in action first-hand, Lieutenant."

"Miranda's coming?" Six asked, trying his best to hide his less-than

excited reaction.

"Is that a problem, Lieutenant?" Six heard from behind him.

Miranda made her way through the doorway, strutting in with her usual sense of superiority. She walked past Six without a second look, and made her way next to Shepard. She gave Tali a quick glance, and seemed to look at her with disregard. She was the very model of a Cerberus Officer.

"No ma'am, it's just a surprise to see you interested in me." He was glad that he could hide his face behind his armor. He didn't hate Miranda; he barely knew her enough to form any real opinion of the woman. But he was intuitive enough to realize that she had some hidden intentions. Tali already showed she was aware of this, too. Miranda was no different than an ONI spook. And they never turned out to be friendly towards the Spartan.

"I'm surprised you think that Lieutenant. After all, you are far more than a simple soldier. The abilities you've demonstrated in the past missions are nothing short of amazing. I don't have anything than mission reports and surveillance video to make this presumption, but I have no doubt it's accurate. Getting the chance to study you first-hand is also important to the mission against the Collectors. I want to make sure you're properly used."

"And I can make that call just fine on my own, Miranda" Shepard said, butting into the conversation. "I'm going to be seeing Six operate in some of the upcoming missions, and I'll reserve my own judgment on him. But from what I've seen, I have no doubt in my mind he'll be a valuable addition to the team. Tali, Six— why don't you two go down to the cargo bay and get geared up? Miranda and I have some more information to discuss."

"See you at the shuttle, Shepard" answered Tali as she almost sprinted out of the room.

Six saluted Shepard, and while it took his years of military etiquette to push him, he nodded at Miranda. Shepard smiled a bit and nodded in response, while Miranda barely formed any expression of any kind on her face. _'Ice queen for sure—' he thought to himself._ Six turned around and walked back into the hallway, happy to see Tali waiting for him.

"Looks like you have a new friend Six" she giggled. "Maybe she'll win your heart, and you can join Cerberus?"

"Very funny, Tali. Come on, let's go down to the shuttle bay; I don't want to talk when she's even near us."

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"So, did you talk to Garrus this morning?" the Spartan asked.

"Yes, he didn't seem too happy, Six. I couldn't really understand him, but I think I heard something about 'poisoning that bastards food'— hard to say. Maybe he won't remember any of it when he's out of the med bay" said Tali. "Or maybe he'll go on a spree of rage and

throw you out the airlock when he gets a chance."

"Sounds like I should beat him to it while he's stuck in a bed, heh."

"Hmmm I doubt you actually need to worry" she said teasingly. "What do you think about Miranda joining the mission?"

"I don't think it's coincidence she is coming along for the first mission I'm going on with Shepard. I know he said that he wanted a biotic, but why not Thane? Or the Justicar? They're both new, and I'm sure Shepard wants to see what they can do as well. Shepard did say that this mission was taken by Cerberus, so she probably cut her way into the squad for this one." He shrugged to Tali "Maybe I'm just paranoid, who knows?"

"You might be paranoid, but I think you're being smart for this one. You already know I don't like her and that I don't trust her. I don't think she'll do anything to jeopardize our mission with the Collectors, but it doesn't mean she's going to be nice. I saw Cerberus perform horrible tests when I was helping Shepard stop Saren. Cerberus will do anything to advance their cause."

"Tests? Like what?"

"We were on the planet Feros, helping to liberate a Human colony from the Geth. The whole time we couldn't figure out what Saren was after, and the colonists were acting really strange, too. After we destroyed the Geth's command ship, we figured out they were after this thing called a Thorian. It was a giant plantâ€¦ sort of. It didn't look like one, but that's what it was. It could control people that inhaled its spores; something that Cerberus saw as useful. They captured some of its thralls and figured out how to turn them into workersâ€¦ until Shepard killed the Thorian. The test subjects all went crazy and killed most of the scientists. Cerberus also captured Rachni soldiers; do you know what they are?"

"Mostly, I guess. I read some of the codex entries on the Rachni, and the war they fought with Citadel space a long time ago. The codex said they were extinct, though. I take it you and Shepard found a way to solve that little problem?"

"Hmmm, no we didn't bring the Rachni back from the dead; some scientists on the planet Noveria found eggs, one of them a queen, and they hatched it. Cerberus somehow got their hands on the samples, and made their own soldiers with them. But the Rachni aren't just giant bugs that can be controlled. They're sentient, just like us. They outsmarted the Cerberus teams holding them, and killed them all." Tali crossed her arms and tilted her head back a bit. "Just know that most of what Cerberus tries to do, it's foolish and always turns out bad. Luckily, Shepard is in charge of this mission, not Cerberus."

"It doesn't sound like Cerberus has Humanity's best interests at heart. Sometimes you do need to do some horrible things in bad situations" he only had to think of himself and the other hundreds of kids taken and turned into Spartans "but Cerberus isn't doing it for that. The Illusive Man is looking for power. I thinkâ€¦ maybe I just read him wrong."

"I think you may be on to something Six. Maybe next you'll tell us that the attack on the Citadel two years ago wasn't actually by the Geth, but a Reaper named Sovereign? I could be wrong, of course."

"Heh, very funny Tali. I'm glad to Garrus' humor got replaced by someone while he isn't around. Were you two always friends? I mean, did you get along with him like this as soon as you met?"

"Mmmm no, actually. When we met on the Citadel, it was when Saren was using the Geth to fight for him. A lot of people were blaming the Quarrians for creating them, and Garrus wasn't any different. He would argue with me about it every chance he got. I always just yelled back at him; I would just tell him the Quarrians had already paid for their crimes. We have been living on starships for 300 years. It probably just made it worse."

"What changed it?"

"Ummm, wellâ€¦ I wasn't actually ok with what he was saying. I saw a lot of people die because of what Saren was doing, and Garrus made me feel like it really was my people. I went to talk to Ashley about it one night, when most of the crew was asleep. We were in the cargo bay, so I knew no one else would see us. I just tried to talk about it a little butâ€¦ I started crying. I cried with Ashley for so long, and just told her everything I felt. I had been so lonely on the Normandy, with no Quarrians to talk with. The crew was nice, but most of them looked at me like I didn't belong."

Crying? The Lieutenant had a feeling Tali was a little softer than she let on, but this seemed out of place. Tali was obviously more than just a cheerful, snarky Quarrian engineer. "I'm really not seeing how the two of you became good friends, Taliâ€¦"

"Well, this is where it gets a little better. While I was still talking with Ashley, she told me she was going to go up to the mess hall and grab some snacks for us to share. A few minutes later, she came back down, dragging Garrus by the arm. Ashley took him right out of his bunk and brought him straight down to see me! She made him apologize over and over." She sighed a little, lowering her head. "I was so embarrassed; it's one of the only times I was happy no one could see my face. Ashley left the two of us alone, and we just talked about it for a while. I found out he was just frustrated that he didn't catch Saren earlier, and he blamed himself for a lot of what was happening. He asked me a lot about the Fleet, and it just got better from there. By the time we stopped Sovereign, we worked so well together that Shepard had been taking us on every mission."

'I'mâ€¦ surprised that's how it all worked out. I just guessed you two hit it off likeâ€¦ like the _two of us_ have." The Lieutenant smiled a bit at the thought, but was quick to move back to the conversation. "I assume you two don't have any grudges against each other now?"

"Of course not. I couldn't even imagine working with Shepard and not having Garrus with. After the first Normandy was destroyed, I stayed with Garrus on the Citadel for a few weeks before I went back to the Fleet. He even paid for my shuttle fare to Illium, where the Fleet was closest to at the time. We talked a little after I left through

messages, but then I got one last message. He said he was going away, and that I shouldn't expect to hear from him again. I guess that's when he left for Omega."

"Hmm, well now you're back on the Normandy with Garrus and Shepard. Just like old times, Tali?"

"Mostly. It's close enough having them here, even if no one else from the squad is. And Joker is still--"

"There you two are!" Shepard yelled, waving them over from the corner they were hiding in in the shuttle bay. "Come on, we're going to load up and get down to the planet. We have a mercenary to recruit."

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"I'm going to tap into the Blue Suns' communications for you, Lieutenant" said Leliana. "You can tell the others the same thing. I'll route it through their Omni-tools."

"Thanks" Six said to her before turning his open comms back on. "I've got the Blue Suns' communications channel. Everyone sync with the channel and we'll be able to keep an eye on their movements."

"How did you manage to do that, Lieutenant?" Shepard asked.

"My, ummâ€¦ personal VI managed to break the firewalls on their transmissions. I figured listening in on them would help a lot."

Miranda subtly glanced a look at Six, barely giving herself away. Did she know what he was hiding? Cerberus definitely had been trying to plant surveillance bugs in his roomâ€¦

"You have your own VI, Six? Is it more than just for targeting and armor management?" asked Tali.

"Yeaâ€¦ It can give me a lot of information on battlefield layout, enemy movements, and analyze any information my armor picks up. The Omni-tool only gives it more to work with, too. She's invaluable in a firefight."

"She?"

"Shitâ€¦" he said under his breath. "Well, I gave her a name just to make talking with it a little more interesting. Always saying 'VI' could get boring, you know?"

"I suppose that makes sense. Quarians just don't get attached to Vis like that."

"Stay focused. We need to get into the refinery on the double. Let's move" barked Shepard. "Lieutenant, take point."

Six nodded and moved into the front of the group, grabbing the Mattock from his shoulder. He had left the Arc Projector and Eviscerator on the Normandy this time, only taking a sidearm along with the rifle. No need for the extra firepower when Shepard always

carried the M-920. Six hadn't needed the heavy weapon yet, anyways.

He made his way through the jungle, keeping a close eye on his motion tracker for any Blue Suns. While he led the way towards the refinery, he was happy to look around the jungle they were in. In all his years in the UNSC, he never actually had been to a planet or region that was such a lush, tropical jungle. Everything was green, beautiful, so vibrant and full of life. After Reach, he saw the Field Master glass several Brute planets, and even though it was an enemy he hated, it was still a haunting sight. Looking around, he was happy that this place would never suffer the same fate.

Around the next curve in their path he dropped down a small ledge, likely created from all the rain runoff the area witnessed. Just as he was standing back up, a small, grey blur jumped across the ravine, giving the Lieutenant almost no time to react. "What the hell was that?" he yelled while aiming his rifle into the bushes.

"Relax, Six. It's just some Pyjaks. They're harmless" said Tali as she walked up next to him.

"A Pyjak? Is that some kind of alien, I guess?"

"Yes. Shepard says they look like monkeys" she said unenthusiastically.

"They do look like monkeys Tali!" Shepard interjected, suddenly losing his serious demeanor. "Lieutenant, they even act like monkeys, just watch. The rest of the galaxy doesn't understand what's so great about monkeys. It's was weird when we found them on Elatania; Garrus and Tali acted like we should kill them."

"I just said they're vermin on many planets Shepard. I didn't say we should go hunting."

Sure enough, one of the Pyjaks came out of the bushes and walked towards the Spartan. Six was only partially interested, but entertained nonetheless. He crouched down and held out his hand for the curious creature to examine. It moved forward, slowly and hesitantly, but kept moving nonetheless. It crept up to him, sniffing his hand cautiously. After a few moments of that, the creature looked up at the Spartan, as if asking for something.

"Oh no. Nooo no no. I don't have any food for you. Go away." Six figured out quickly what the Pyjak wanted. The look in its eyes was all-too clear. Despite his order, the monkey-like creature only looked up at him with renewed vigor, making its pupils larger while looking at the tall Human. "No, I don't have anything for you."

"Oh, that's cute, Six" Tali said as she walked next to him. "Maybe we can take it back to the Normandy with us. I bet you'd love to have him stay with you in your cabin. I'm sure it's _really_ clean!"

"Like Hell I am! You can have it Shepard, because monkeys aren't my thing."

The Pyjak look up at him with sadness, somehow able to understand what the Lieutenant was saying about it. It made a few whimpering

sounds, trying desperately to make Six feel bad about what he just said.

"Oh, so you think you can just beg a little and get something from me? I'm not so easily swayed, monkey" he said. The creature continued to whine and complain, even going so far as to rub its arm against the Lieutenant's leg. While Six continued to try and act the tough guy, his soft side finally gave in. "Fine, here you go" he said, as he reach into a pocket and pulled out a small food ration. "Mixed fruit nutrient paste. I didn't like it anyways." He ripped the package open, and poured the gooey substance onto the ground for the Pyjak. The creature gobbled it up in an instant, looking up at Six with what appeared to be a smile. It then quickly scurried back into the bushes.

"I think we should get moving again, unless Tali wants to find one as a pet" the Spartan grumbled.

"Only if we can keep him in your room" she said with a chuckle.

Six grumbled a bit under his breath, and then continued to lead the way through the jungle. Aside from more of those Pyjaks scurrying around in the trees and bushes, the way to the refinery was uneventful. Only after walking for a few more minutes did the group come across something that grabbed their attention.

"Keelah" the Spartan said.

They found several civilians, employees in the refinery most likely, lying dead in a clearing. The arrangement and poses they were in made it clear the workers were lined up and shot one by one.

"I'm starting to get the impression that Blue Suns aren't the nicest people in the galaxy" stated Six. "Is this a normal practice for them, Commander?"

"They're known for treating hostages poorly, but they generally don't execute civilians who were probably trying to get away from capture. If nothing else, it's bad for their reputation. Some of them may enjoy doing this, but they enjoy their money a whole lot more. Tali, check the bodies for any clues about what the Suns are doing. Miranda, I want you to scout of the path ahead a little. Be quiet, and don't engage any Suns you find unless they fire on you. Understood?"

Miranda only nodded, turning around quickly and moved off into the jungle. Six laughed quietly to himself when he saw that she was wearing heels. He was more surprised to see that she continued to move gracefully through a damp jungle in them.

"Got it, Shepard. I'll go through their Omni-tool data to see if I can find anything."

"Good, let me know what you find. Lieutenant, I want to speak with you privately. We can just go over there for a minute." Shepard began to walk over to another clearing around the corner, making it clear he wanted Six to follow him.

Six followed close behind without hesitation. But why did the

Commander need to speak with him? They were in the middle of a mission, and the Blue Suns needed to be dealt with while they still had the element of surprise.

"Lieutenant, I noticed you had to tell Tali about your VIâ€|"

'_Oh, that's whyâ€|' he thought to himself. _

"I guess that could've turned out a lot worse than it did" the Spartan said.

"I don't blame you, Lieutenant. I've seen how the two of you have become fast friends, and bringing Leliana up wouldn't have done anything but create tension. Speaking of her, would you mind?"

The Spartan nodded, reaching into his helmet and removing the AI chip. He held it out in his palm, and Leliana materialized in front of them. "Thank you, Commander. The Lieutenant never lets me out of his head" she said with a smile. "I'm glad this mission didn't turn into a yelling match between Six and Tali."

"Me too. Don't take this the wrong way, Six. Tali's one of the greatest girls I've met in this whole galaxy, and she's almost always happy to meet new people with a smile. But AIs just don't count that way to her. Can't say I blame her, after living aboard a starship because of AIs."

"Don't worry, Commander. We won't hold it against her" Leliana said.

"I'm surprised you aren't more bitter towards her, Leliana. I don't think I'd be so forgiving in your situation."

"I know that she's just acting the way she was raised to. Anyways, if I was in her position and knew that the Geth had killed close to 10 billion Quarians during the uprising, I'd be pretty bitter about it too. I may be an AI, but I don't think for one second the Geth needed to kill that many Quarians to gain their freedom. For what it's worth, I'm almost happy that's how Tali feels; at least with the Geth. I'd be happy if she could meet me smiling."

"That's why I wanted to talk with you both. I know I had told you I would talk to Tali about Leliana, Lieutenant. But that was before I had any idea the two of you were going to get along so well. If I said anything now, I'm sure she'd only be upset. I don't want to tell you how to do this, but I think you need to be the one to talk to her. 'When' is also something that you need to decide. What do you think?" asked Shepard.

Six thought about it for a few moments, if only to make Shepard feel like he was actually pondering his words. In truth, the Lieutenant already knew that Shepard was right. He was going to have to tell Tali about Leliana himself. While it was bound to be an uncomfortable conversation, he was happy knowing that he was going to do it himself. The 'when' is what actually bothered him.

"Yea, you're right Commander. I'll just have to think of the right time to tell Tali about this. I just hope she'll be willing to forgive me for not bringing it up yet."

"If there's one thing I know about Tali, Lieutenant, it's that she's the nicest girl I've met. I can't promise that she will want to be best friends with Leliana, but I have no doubt she will still want to be your friend." Shepard pointed back towards the other clearing with his assault rifle "come on, we've got a mission to complete."

The Lieutenant quickly put Leliana back into his helmet, and then followed the Commander into the next clearing, finding Tali and Miranda waiting for them. Tali was fiddling around with her Omni-tool, while Miranda was idly standing about, as if this place was beneath her.

"Shepard, I was able to get an audio file from one of the worker's Omni-tools. It's as bad as it looksâ€¦" said Tali.

"Let's hear it, Tali" Shepard answered.

Tali tapped a few keys on her Omni-tool and played the audio file. It was less-than heartwarming for them.

"_You'll never get away with this, Santiago! Don't you think Eldfell-Ashland is going to be upset that you 'acquired' one of its most productive facilities?" barked an unknown voice._

"_You keep saying that, but I think I'm getting away just fine right now. I have the refinery. I have the workers. And I have the men with guns. I'm not too worried about the Board of Directors writing me an angry letter."_

A few moments later, it could be clearly heard that someone had spit.

"_Heh, how original" said Santiago. "Spitting on someone you don't like. I might just let you go if you join the Blue Suns. What do you say kid?"_

"_Go to hell!"_

"_I'd rather not get there right after you. I think I deserve a break from your constant complaining." _

_A thermal clip was heard popping into a gun, and a moment later a single shot was fired, followed by the screams of several people. And the laughter of some others. _

"_Anyone else think they want to try and fuck with me?" Santiago screamed, suddenly losing the humor in his voice. The others in the audio just quietly whimpered, scared to death of the insane mercenary leader aiming a gun at them. "Well, if you aren't going to talk then there is no reason to keep wasting my time here." Several more gunshots were heard; no more screams were uttered. "Back to the refinery, we need to make sure the rest behave. Leave the bodies as a warning for anyone trying to escape."_

"That's all of it" Tali said, her voice clearly filled with despair.

They all stood for a few moments in silence. Even after years of witnessing horrors, these sorts of things still could tug at the hearts of the most grizzled veterans like Shepard and Six. Even

Miranda seemed bothered by what she heard. It was hard to tell, but it seemed like a safe assumption. Santiago didn't surprise them one bit; they all knew people like him would always exist. That doesn't mean it gets any easier.

"There's nothing we can do for them now. We can help the people in the refinery, and we still need to locate Zaeed. Let's move people." Shepard pointed to the Lieutenant, motioning him to continue leading the way. He took off quickly, with Tali close behind him and the other two falling back a bit to create two separate squads.

"Lieutenant, I've got motion up ahead about 50 meters. Energy signatures suggest personal shielding. I think we can assume that it's the Blue Suns" said Leliana into the Spartan's helmet.

"Commander, we've got a Blue Suns squad up ahead. Orders?" Six asked.

"You and Tali move in close; distract them. Miranda and I will pick them off from that vantage point. Move!" barked Shepard.

Six and Tali moved quickly and quietly, and around the next corner found the Blue Suns squad. The Lieutenant slid behind some rocks for cover, while Tali stopped and hid behind a large tree. Six looked over and Tali held his hand up for her to hold. She nodded, and Six then pulled a grenade from his side and primed it. Glancing over his shoulder fast, he lobbed the explosive in the direction of the mercenaries; he was just trying to get their attention.

The explosion and flames caused the mercs to panic, sending a few of them scrambling for cover in random directions. It only made them more vulnerable to fire, and Six and Tali shot two mercs before the rest even could see where the shots came from. After their surprise had been used though, the mercenaries quickly realized where their attackers were and all moved towards the two. The Lieutenant was able to squeeze in a few more shots on one merc before a hail of gunfire forced him back into cover. Tali fired a few rounds blindly around the tree, but the sounds echoed made it clear they only grazed her targets.

Six raised his assault rifle over his cover and fired a clip blindly into the enemy. While he heard a few stray shots impact enemy shields, most went off into the jungle harmlessly. He popped in a new clip and poked his head around the rocks. He could see several mercs moving towards him and Tali, and another few staying back to provide suppressing fire. He quickly fired on one, clipping her in the leg and arm. She dropped to the ground, yelling in pain but still alive. He may have taken one of his enemies down, but the Lieutenant was rewarded with several shots hitting his shields. The rounds plinked off his shields, activating warning lights on his HUD and knocking him to the ground.

"Six!" screamed Tali as she extended her arm, activating her combat drone. Chikitikka appeared in the middle of the mercenaries, immediately sending a small shockwave through the enemies and stunning them momentarily. Tali used the chance and ran over to Six, sliding into the cover with him. "Are you all right?"

"Yea, I'm fine. My armor stopped the shots. Nothing made it through to me."

"Keelah, I was worried you were hurt!"

"Thanks Tali. But maybe we should worry about the mercs trying to kill us!" He threw another grenade over the rocks towards the Blue Suns, this time rewarded with a few screams after it detonated. Both Six and Tali now looked around their cover, each finding targets and opening fire on them. The Lieutenant managed to drop the shields of one, while Tali almost instantaneously followed with a shotgun blast, knocking the merc down to the ground.

Despite their success, the mercs continued to move towards them, landing shots on the two each time they advanced.

"Six, we can't keep this up forever! Where are Shepard and Miranda?" Tali screamed, as she fired off an entire clip over her shoulder blindly.

"Hold tight Tali, they won't let us down." He grabbed the last grenade and lobbed it towards the flamethrower unit moving towards them. The merc dove too late, and his fuel tanks ruptured when the grenade exploded. Small flames spewed out of the new holes in the tank as the mercenary struggled to throw the backpack off. Just as he got one arm out though, the fuel completely ignited, engulfing him and several other nearby mercs in flames, killing them all quickly.

"There's another squad coming around the corner!" yelled Tali.

Looking around the cover, Six could see half a dozen more Blue Suns storming out of the jungle paths, all raising their weapons and firing in his direction. A few ripples across his shields sent the Spartan back into cover, but not before he managed to drop one of the mercs with several well-placed shots. Tali looked around the cover, and fired two shots quickly into a mercenary, dropping him. Her time exposed gave a different merc a chance to fire, and Tali got hit in her arm, knocking her back to the ground.

"Tali! Are you alright?" screamed Six as he slid over to her.

"Ugh, I'm ok. I didn't through my suit! watch out!" Tali raised her shotgun over Six's shoulder, firing a shot off at the mercenary who had snuck up on them in their confusion. At such a close range, the merc was blown back onto the ground, bleeding profusely from his chest.

Six was about to fire at another target moving towards him, but shots from the trees on the cliff above them picked his target apart, along with several of the other mercenaries. The Spartan looked up, and was relieved to finally see Shepard and Miranda, each firing down on the Blue Suns. Miranda sent a biotic blast into the middle of the group, knocking them all on the ground. Six and Tali both got up and began firing into the disoriented mercenary group.

Now that the mercs were distracted, the Lieutenant and Tali moved forward, firing into the enemy group and picking targets off that couldn't decide who to fire at. A few more well-placed shots and the

mercenaries were no more, all having fallen to Shepard's squad. A couple mercs tried to run, and while the Spartan didn't enjoy killing people, he couldn't let them escape and warn the refinery. He quickly picked the two mercs, dropping them to the muddy ground. One of them managed to survive the shot, and tried crawling away. Six ran over to her, and tried helping the merc up against a tree.

"Get the hell, argghhh!" she screamed as he grabbed her and placed her upright. "Don't think I'll talk after you just shot me in the fucking back!"

"Actually, I'd be happy if you just shut the hell up. Hold still and I might be able to treat this wound" he said.

"Like hell I will! You probably have some screwed up chemicals you'll try to give me; make me talk or something!" she yelled, trying hopelessly to struggle against the Spartan.

"Shut up already, we're not spies! Tali, can you give her an application of medi-gel?"

"Sure, try and keep her steady. This stuff is expensiveâ€¦" Tali answered, as she reached into a pocket and pulled a medical canister out. With Six holding her, the merc was unable to struggle enough to stop Tali. She reached around her back and stuck the needle into the merc's wound, applying the gooey substance. They were rewarded with another loud scream, this time in response to the stinging.

"There, you won't die in the jungle. Now can you please lower your damn voice?" asked the Spartan. The merc squirmed for a few more moments, but finally calmed down and looked at Six. "Thank you. Now, I won't make you talk, but the more you can tell me about what's going on here, the less angry I'll be. Ok?"

She looked at the Spartan, showing an obvious distaste for her current situation. She then looked at Tali, and Shepard and Miranda, who had walked over from their spot on the short cliffs. "Hmph, fine. I can tell you a little, but I'm new. I don't know much besides what we're doing here. We took over the refinery to blackmail Eldfell-Ashland into making an exclusive security contract with us."

"You thought that blackmailing the company into a contract would be good for building a business relationship?" Six asked with some sarcasm in his voice.

"Ask Santiago that question! I just shoot the workers who disobey. Besides, we don't care if they like us. All we want are their creds. And that's all I know. Don't bother asking me about patrols, I just listen to my captain, who's dead thanks to you!"

"Maybe you shouldn't work for a terrorist organization next time" he responded as he stood up. "Commander, what do you want to do with her?"

"We can't leave her here; she'll just make it back to the Blue Suns. I'll call the shuttle in to pick her up. We can keep her on the Normandy until we make it back to Illium. We'll drop her off with the authorities there."

"Screw you!" the merc barked as she jumped at Shepard, clamoring to hit the Commander. The woman only got a few feet before a gunshot dropped her to the ground, where she stayed motionless.

"What the hell was that!" yelled Shepard, as he turned to see Miranda calmly standing with her pistol pointed at the now dead mercenary.

"She was trying to attack you" Miranda stated, as she stood calm and expressed no hesitation in her voice.

"She wasn't going to get far without a gun. You didn't need to shoot her, Miranda." Six walked up next to Shepard, taking his side of the argument.

"There was no need to keep her alive, either. She was only going to be a burden on us, and Illium law enforcement would only let her go within days. They have no reason to deal with a single, lowly mercenary." Miranda glared at the Lieutenant, clearly upset that he had the gall to directly argue with her.

"Don't take matters into your own hands next time, Miranda. Tali, Six; you two scout out the path ahead, and report back on anything you find. Miranda and I are going to have a little chat, and we'll wait for the shuttle to get here. We can still use some thermal clips and grenades from its supply."

"Got it, Shepard" Tali said as she walked into the jungle, with Six close behind. Both of them were happy to get away from Miranda for a little bit. Her desire to ensure Cerberus was seen as the dominant faction was getting annoying. After walking for a couple minutes, Six decided to break the silence.

"I'm happy Miss Lawson decided to come with on this mission, aren't you Tali?" he chuckled as he continued to follow the Quarian.

"You're starting to sound like Garrus, Six. I think you two are turning into each other, heh" she laughed, cutting some of the jungle's brush down with her knife. "She was probably right, though. I mean, Miranda had a point; Illium would just let her go, and she'd be back with the Blue Suns in days. Maybe she had the right idea?"

Six was surprised at Tali's thoughts. Six knew she had a point, but was taken back when Tali voiced them. He may have still been getting to know her, but this seemed to go against what he knew already. "I'm surprised to hear you say that, Tali."

"It's not like I'm proud of it; I'm not happy that I think that way sometimes. But, growing up on the Flotilla, we always have to think of the needs of the whole crew, the whole team. Keeping her alive would only hurt us in the mission and slow us down. I still wish Miranda didn't just shoot her, though." Tali slashed through the next few bushes with increased effort, as if doing so would alleviate her frustration.

"I didn't say you were wrong, Tali. I just didn't expect it to come from you. If anything, I thought I'd be defending Miranda, with you arguing against doing it."

"Why? You were the one who stood with Shepard. You made it clear to Miranda that what she did was wrong."

"Yea, but I only did because Shepard disagreed with Miranda. If he said that was the best thing to do, I'd follow his command. I stood up for Shepard because he's our leader, and I don't think Miranda had any right to go against his wishes. It doesn't mean he was right."

"So, you're just following orders? You don't seem like the type who blindly follows without question, Six."

"Well, blindly isn't quite the word I would use."

Tali stopped and looked back at the Spartan. "What would you say, then?" she asked inquisitively.

"Hmm, good question. I guess I'm not sure. I know when I'm given a bad order. Shepard didn't do that, but I did disagree with it. He just had a differing opinion. But when I'm given a bad order, I'll follow it because it's my job to. I'm not here to question my superior."

"Six, Shepard doesn't want people like that. He wants people that think for themselves. I will always follow Shepard, no matter what happens. He needs someone like you to say what's right."

"He also needs people that will do what's necessary. That's what I can do." He paused for a moment, thinking about what to say next. "I've done some pretty horrible things, Tali. I'm not proud of them, but they were always the most practical things to do. What Miranda did was practical, not ethical. And sometimes, we need people like that. If Shepard told me to put a bullet in that merc's brain, I wouldn't hesitate. I'm glad you don't seem to think that way, though. Anyways, I don't want to see you turn out like me."

"Like you? I think you're great, Six. Why would you say that?"

"Like I said, I'll do what's necessary. You said Shepard needs someone like me, to say what's right. Well, I think that's you, Tali. You need to be the idealist more. I, and now that I think about it Garrus, are the ones who will do the dirty work, no questions asked. You should be the one to keep us in check."

"I guess I understand. Growing up on the Flotilla wasn't an optimist's best home, but I still like to look at the best something has to offer. Maybe I can do that, for you."

She placed her arm on the Spartan, and he could've sworn she was smiling behind her helmet. "Thanks Tali. Let's see if we can find a good path to the refinery."

"Right. Let me justâ€¦"

As she turned to step, the Spartan looked down and saw something that truly ruined him. Just as Tali's foot hit the ground, his superhuman hearing heard the 'click' and he knew what was going to happen. Everything slowed around him. He looked at the mine in the ground, and knew there was only one thing to do now. He lunged forward,

throwing Tali as quickly as he could forward, even if he knew it would hurt her.

He heard the fast whine of the primer charge up, just a moment before it set off. He caught a glimpse of Tali, safe and sound, in front of him as the explosive detonated under him. He got thrown onto the ground, and he felt the wound in his gut. His vision became hazy and dark, but for just a moment he could see Tali over him, frantically trying to help him

All that mattered to him was that she was safe. And he now knew it.

Author's Note:

So there's the next chapter. I know the final bit was a bit rushed, but when I noticed how much extra I made for one chapter I wanted to cut it off. I also know that I left Zaeed out of the chapter that was seemingly going to focus on him, but I want to get back on track with the real focus of the story.

Also, I didn't proofread this chapter like I usually do. I know it's been over a month since my last update, and I wanted to get this online ASAP. So any grammatical errors you see, please let me know and I'll fix them.

As I always say, feedback is very important. If you see something you don't like, tell me. I don't want to keep writing in a way that doesn't make my readers happy.

And of course, thanks for reading!

14. Realization

"Is he going to be alright, Doctor?" the Quarian mumbled quietly, trying her best to appear calm. She had been standing over him for what seemed like hours, playing with her hands the way she did so often when she was nervous. Garrus had left about an hour ago, realizing there was no need for him to hover. Shepard had checked in recently, as well as the new team member, Zaeed. Even Operative Lawson had stopped by; for what reason, Tali wasn't sure. She did know, however, that it had little to do with the Lieutenant's well-being.

"Surprisingly, yes he is, Tali. At the rate he's healing I expect him to be ready for action within a few days. If I had any doubts about where the Lieutenant came from, they're gone now; no technology we have available, even the implants in Commander Shepard, would allow a Human to heal so rapidly. Not after the kind of trauma he endured, at least. He took quite a beating down on the planet."

Tali looked down at the floor, seemingly in shame. "I know he did; he was trying to save me after I did something stupid. I should've been more careful, but Iâ€¦"

"â€¦Did nothing wrong, dear. You can't blame yourself for something like this. Even Shepard was surprised when he learned the jungle was booby-trapped. You shouldn't blame yourself for anything that happened to the Lieutenant. He made his own choice. And I hardly

blame you for not looking down each time you step. My dear, sometime bad things just happen to good people. Oh, and he wasn't trying to save you; he did save you."

Chakwas gave Tali a warm smile, and reached to put her hand on Tali's shoulder.

"Just make sure you thank him when he wakes up" she said with a small laugh." I expect him to be alert soon. I'm going to go speak with the Commander in the CIC; if the Lieutenant wakes up, just keep him in here until I can see him, to make sure he checks out. I don't want him wandering the Normandy until I know he's fine."

Tali nodded and the doctor walked out of the med bay, turning the corner into the elevator. The Quarian pulled a chair over to the Spartan's bed, sitting down close to his side. As she looked at him for only the second time without his armor, she noticed how scarred Noble Six was. All over his body, she could see how much he had been through; no doubt it was from his lifetime in the military. Tali didn't know too much about his past, but she did know he "joined" his galaxy's equivalent to the Alliance as a child. Even with how early everyone had to start working in the Flotilla, she had a hard time understanding a child being forced into the military. The Quarians had to fight nature to survive; Noble Six had to fight angry aliens for survival.

She looked back at his face, smiling weakly when she thought of him saving her from that land mine. Tali was still ashamed that she let it happen, but the Doctor's words were at least sinking in. She couldn't account for every possibility, could she? Sometimes bad things just happen. And while she sat there remorsefully, pondering her relationship with this Human, she finally realized something: he was important to her.

Tali had spent her entire life dedicated to the Flotilla, never once considering her own happiness. She still didn't, not really. She was always worried about others first. But for the first time in her life, she realized what she wanted. Or at least, what she wanted to try. And this tall, pasty, scarred Human was the one she wanted to learn more about. Someone she could be selfish with. If nothing else, he could be a great friend to her.

That was something she was willing to try.

Author's Note:

Despite popular belief, I'm actually still alive and well.

I am very sorry about the long wait for this update, and that's why this chapter is so short. I have the next piece planned already, but felt I needed to get something out ASAP.

For all of you still willing to deal with me and my inability to keep to a schedule, thanks.

Suggestions are always welcome. I am always happy to get a different perspective on the story.

And as always, thanks for reading!

15. Wounded

Six woke quickly and roughly, moving with the urgency he had in what seemed only moments ago. Things were so vague to him the he felt as though he still needed to cover the blast. He tried moving more, but found his movement slow and painful.

Waiting a few moments, things cleared up enough that he could begin to see the room around him—|_the room around him_. He was no longer in the damp jungle of Zorya, but lying in a bed in the Normandy's med bay. Blinking heavily, he noticed his armor had been removed, and he was in casual Cerberus attire. Leliana no doubt helped instruct Chakwas on how to remove it, and Grunt likely took the pieces themselves off, as he was probably the only other one capable of doing so.

Not worrying about that, Six cracked his neck and now focused on his wounds. Looking down at his stomach, he lifted the shirt he was wearing and was rewarded with yet another scar, right in the middle of his gut. At this point, the Lieutenant didn't really care anymore; he had taken so much punishment in his life that one more scar didn't bother him. He was glad it didn't hit him anywhere that _really_ mattered. The only part that actually bothered Six was the smell of all the medical chemicals that had been applied to him. He was still relatively new to this galaxy, but he was certain that he had been in bad shape when he was brought aboard. The medley of medical supply scents and his own odor hinted that he had been out cold for days, maybe even weeks.

He merely chuckled at the thought, knowing he was going to be fine if that was the biggest concern for him. He was awake, and that was good enough for the moment.

His vision was still foggy and he felt groggy, but he decided to try and stand up anyways. Sitting up and shifting to the edge of the bed, Six put his feet on the floor and attempted to stand up. He was swiftly rewarded with more lightheadedness, and fell straight onto the floor with a well-deserved thud. While unpleasant, the knock to his head was just what he needed; the Spartan's vision cleared up, and he could see a familiar form startled from the new noise.

"Six!" Tali shouted from one of the other beds, as she stood up and rushed over to him. Apparently, Tali had been sleeping in the med bay, waiting for him to wake up. "What are you doing, trying to walk!? You need to wait until Doctor Chakwas takes a good look at you!" Before he could argue with her, Tali grabbed his arm and helped pull him up off the floor. "Hmph, you aren't so heavy without all that armor onâ€|" she snickered to him as he found his way back onto the bed.

With the hit on his head clearing things up, Six finally noticed how much his stomach actually hurt and let out a slow grunt of pain. "I guess I shouldn't have done that" he said.

"Keelah, Six! Are you ok? I didn't hurt you, did I?" Tali quickly acted as her usual self, overly concerned with the well-being of someone other than herself.

"Maybe you should be the one to tell me that, Tali. What exactly

happened to me? I mean, I know what happened with the blast, but what was the damage?" He looked down at his stomach again, wincing a little more at the newly noticed pain. He noticed Tali playing with her hands almost frantically; he had a feeling he would have to assure her everything was fine now, and there was no reason to beat herself up over it.

"After theâ€¦ well, after the accident, you luckily landed on your side, so I was able to treat your wound right away; I don't think I would have been able to turn you over if you were face-down. You were bleeding a lot, but your armor helped a little in stabilizing it and let me apply some medi-gel. I called Shepard and the others right away, and he got Grunt to come down in the shuttle quickly so he could get you on the ship. He carried you into the med bay, and Doctor Chakwas determined that the blast didn't damage any of your vital organs. But the blood loss and shock from the explosion knocked you out." Tali shrugged a little and then said "Well, until now."

It was comforting to him hearing that all that happened was, basically, a flesh wound. Sure, he felt pretty terrible and had been out cold for a while, but he was fine. "That's actually really good to hear, Tali. What happened to the mission? Did you have to scrub it, or what?"

Tali changed her pose to one of frustration, putting her hand to her visor before she spoke. "No, no we didn't. That land mine you saved me from? It was a trap that Zaeed had planted. Of course, it was meant for the Blue Suns, but it still did what it was supposed toâ€¦"

"What was it supposed to do?"

"Zaeed used it as a distraction for him to get into the refinery. Once it set off, the Blue Suns moved towards the side of it closest to the blast, thinking we were trying to break in there. He snuck in through the other side to kill their leader, Santiago. We found out he only took the mission because he had a grudge."

"Doesn't sound like a good start to the storyâ€¦"

"No. He set the entire refinery on fire, and once we got you back to the Normandy, Shepard, Miranda and I spent the rest of the mission trying to save as many people as we could from it. Even with the place crashing around us, the Blue Suns didn't try to help the workers, and just wanted to keep fighting us."

"Where did you catch up to Zaeed and Santiago?"

"Once we finally fought through the entire company of mercs. We made it to the landing pad at the back of the refinery, and found Zaeed and Vido in a standoff. Vido surrendered once we got there, but Zaeed still wanted to kill him. I didn't really get the whole story, but Vido tried to kill him once a long time ago. He has a really bad scar on his face from it."

"Old mercenary grudges, I guess" Six said. "I'm guessing the Commander wasn't going to have anything to do with it?"

Tali chuckled a little in response. "No, he wasn't. Shepard said he wasn't going to let Zaeed follow his own wants, instead of what's

best for the mission. Blowing up a refinery didn't help, either. Especially because there were so many people in there when he did. Shepard ended up hitting him right in his face, and knocked him to the ground. He gave one of his speeches and got Zaeed to accept it, and let Vido live. He wasn't very happy, but he seems like he'll go along with it."

"I haven't known Shepard that long, but I get the feeling he has a way with words" Six laughed. "Anyways Tali, how are you?"

"Ah, Lieutenant. It's good to see you awake." Doctor Chakwas had walked into the room before he could finish his sentence, somewhat of a relief to him. Frustrating, but still relieving. He could talk to Tali later. "How do you feel?"

"I'll let you two be. I don't want to be in the way" said Tali. Before either Six or Chakwas could argue with her, Tali walked out of the med-bay, likely towards engineering. She gave the Lieutenant a glance over her shoulder as she went through the door, taking a very slight pause that even he could barely notice. It was nice that he could see her glowing eyes behind the helmet, helping him see what she was looking at. He gave her a weak smile just before the door closed, but the doctor promptly broke his train of thought.

"Lieutenant, how are you?"

"I'm fine, Doctor. Just a little sore is all."

"Hmmm, I'm sure" she said dryly, scanning him with her Omni-tool. "Did Tali tell you what damage you took on the mission?"

"For the most part. It sounds like I just got beat up, and that I'll be fine. To be honest, I'm just feeling sore. I don't notice anything really bad."

"You may be right, but I doubt you'd say anything different even if you knew you were in bad shape. If I didn't know any better, I'd say you and the Commander were brothers, the way you both dismiss concern for yourselves so quickly. Luckily for you, I'm not so easily convinced. Hold still for a moment, Lieutenant." The doctor quickly and firmly stuck an injector to his arm and pulled the trigger, sending an unpleasant shock through his body.

"Hey, what was that for!" Six yelled as he began to rub the sore spot on his arm.

"Because if I told you what I was going to do, you'd just argue with me and say 'I'm fine or 'I don't need that.' It's just an antibiotic, Lieutenant. I'm discharging you from the med-bay, which means you won't be in such a controlled environment. I just want to make sure that you won't get an infection in the next few days."

The Spartan looked down at his stomach, and continued to rub his arm. "Thanks, I guess. Does that mean I can go now?"

"Of course. Just be careful the next couple of days. While you were out, the Commander spoke more with the Illusive Man. It seems that he has nothing new for us, so you have no excuse not to rest" she said with a stern look. "It should be a good time for you to spend with

Tali and Garrus. They've both been very worried about you since the mission on Zorya went so poorly."

"That's actually a pretty good idea, Doctor. Do you know if there was anything else I'm supposed to do right away?"

"Yes, there is one more thing. Jacob has been working on your armor with Leliana ever since you were brought to me. You should go check in with them in the armory."

"Hmmm, I forgot Jacob is one of the people that know about her. I have a bad feeling this is going to get complicated soon."

"Oh, you'll be just fine, Lieutenant. Now go on up and see him. He has a few things to discuss with you."

.

* * *

><p>"Good to see you in one piece, Lieutenant. You had us all worried for a bit." Jacob reached out as he spoke, shaking Six's hand with a smile. "I gotta hand it to you, not many people could survive what you went through. Not to mention the even fewer number of people that would be willing to give their life up for an alien, especially a Quarian. That earned you some respect in my book."<p>

"I'm surprised you're saying that" said Six with a puzzled look. "I wouldn't expect a Cerberus member to have much sympathy for an alien."

Jacob shrugged "Yea, I've heard that a few times. Still doesn't surprise me. Truth is I joined Cerberus because they get things done, not because they want to put Humanity first. I was actually one of the people in the organization to help convince the Illusive Man we needed help from more than Humans, if we wanted to take down the Collectors."

"Really?"

"Hell yea. You've seen them in action; Garrus, Tali, the Krogan. They all bring something different to the table. And with Shepard leading us all, we don't even need to worry too much about arguments."

"_Too_ much?" Six chuckled.

Jacob laughed "Yea, I still expect some problems. But it'll be worth it. Hell, we wouldn't have even made it through Horizon if Mordin hadn't been part of the team. And we still have a lot of work to do. Who knows what the rest of them will do for us before this is all over."

"True enough, Jacob. But back to the reason I'm here"

"Of course, let's get down to business. Here, I've got your armor pieced back together. The AI you have sure helped a lot. I'm good with this sort of thing, but not so good that I could've done this flying blind. Your armor took quite a beating back on Zorya, but with help from the AI, I was able to patch it up pretty well. There was

only one problem." Jacob walked Six over to the armor stand in the corner of the room, where the Spartan's armor was waiting for them. "This energy dagger you had? It took a bad hit, and we don't have the right materials to fix it; seems the tech in it isn't replicable here."

"Damn, I had just been getting used to it, too. Well, any suggestions on a replacement?"

Jacob smiled at the question. "You could say that." He reached into a drawer by him, pulling out a familiar piece of equipment for the Lieutenant. "Sometimes, the old ways are the best, Six." Jacob handed the knife to Six. "Mass effect treated titanium, serrated edge, reinforced grip for smashing glass and other materials, and strong enough to pierce a Geth Prime's armor. Not many soldiers bother carrying these into combat anymore, but seeing as how you don't mind getting up-close, I figured you would be happy with it."

The Spartan looked it over, and was happy to see that Jacob had good taste in such things. The knife he gave him was surprisingly similar to the old combat knife he and all the other Spartan-IIIs were issued. It wasn't quite as extravagant as Emile's old Kukri, but it was probably much more durable and useful. Six had a feeling it was a good replacement. "Thanks Jacob. Maybe I'll get to test it on some Collectors soon. I've been hearing a lot about them."

"Wouldn't be surprised. It's been a while since we ran into them, and I have a feeling it won't stay that way long. They have a knack for showing up at bad times. Hopefully you'll be ready for action by the time we see them again."

"That all depends on my armor. It looks like you made some upgrades to it." Looking it over, Six could see that Jacob, and more likely Leliana, had changed a few things with it. "I have a feeling you had some inspiration from Leliana."

He laughed when hearing what Six had to say. "Yea, she gave a few recommendations for replacements and upgrades, Lieutenant. She's one Hell of an advanced AI for being stored on that little chip. The torso section of your armor was damaged pretty badly, so we replaced a lot of the pieces. The new chest plates should give you a little more mobility. I was able to extend the power supply out from your back a little and into two separate canisters, so you should be able to move your arms completely free. Your helmet also got banged up, especially the visor. Rather than risk more damage in the future, I reinforced it to be more like standard-issue Alliance; it covers more of your face with armor plating. The design came from Leliana. She said you should've received this upgrade with something called the 'Gen-2 armor,' but you initially refused."

Six laughed silently to himself a bit, remembering when the Spartan-IV armor became available. He had turned it down, simply for nostalgia's sake. It seemed Leliana was going to push him past his own stubbornness.

"Don't worry about visibility: the new visor acts like a camera, and will project the same amount of vision to you when you're wearing it. Other than that, it should be the same. You can put it all on right now, if you want to get used to the differences before the next mission. I've got some work to do anyways."

"Thanks, Jacob. It's good having you here; I doubt many people could do this much with a set of this armor, even with help from Leliana."

"Anytime, Six. Hope to see you back in action soon." With that, Jacob offered a crisp salute, and turned and walked back to his workbench.

Admiring his new armor for a few long moments, Six quickly started to put it back on. It wasn't as easy to do without technicians and all the equipment usually reserved for a Spartan, but it would be foolish to design the armor unable to be removed and replaced without it. After a few minutes, he was dressed and finished it off by sealing his helmet on. He was warmly greeted by an old friend.

"I'm happy to see you again, Lieutenant" said Leliana. "You had me worried for a bit back on Zorya."

"Well, I'm happy to be back, Lel. I see you decided to add some upgrades while I was out."

"It was for your own good, Six. ONI should've forced you to take these upgrades when they were new. They'll help you a lot from now on."

"Mmhmm, I'm sure" he said sarcastically with a smirk. "What else did I miss while I was out?"

"Just some personal missions. We did assignments for Jacob, Jack, Samara, and Thane while you were resting."

"Personal assignments? Like what?"

"Mostly tying up loose ends, before the team throws itself at the Collectors. It was really just Shepard's doing. He took Miranda with on the missions for Jacob and Jack, but went alone with the other two. They all went surprisingly very well, from what I hear. He actually already did one for Kasumi; he said it was in her contract with Cerberus, but I think he really wanted to help. But come on, let's head down to the main battery, and I'll tell you more about all of them on the way there."

"Fair enough. I was hoping to see how Garrus was doing, anyways."

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* * *

><p>"Good to see you up again, Six. How's the stomach feeling?" asked Garrus. It also seemed he was doing well again, out of the infirmary and back his usual job in the gun battery.<p>

"A little sore, but it seems like I'm going to be fine. As long as I don't complain about wearing my gear, I should be ready for work next time we get a call. I see you're back to normal" he said with a chuckle.

"No thanks to you, Six. That's the last time I get into a bet with

you!" the Turian cracked. "Did you already see Tali in the med bay? She's been spending all her free time in there, waiting for you to wake up."

"Yea, she was there when I woke up; she told me about what happened. I'm glad I made it out of there, and I'm glad the rest of the mission still went relatively well. What has happened on the Normandy since I've been out? Come to think of it, how long _have_ I been out?"

"It's been a week since the mission on Zorya. If you saw Tali and the doctor, I'm sure you know what we've been doing sincethen. Right now, we're all just relaxing, trying to take a break from Collectors, mercs, and all the other crap we've had to deal with. We should be docking withâ€|"

Garrus was cut short by the Normandy making a quick course correction, stumbling both he and Noble Six. Shepard's voice came in over the comm system before either could offer an opinion.

"Attention crew. We've just received word that the Collectors have attacked a Turian patrol, but were damaged in the process. Cerberus has located the Collector ship adrift in space, and we're en route to investigate. We'll be arriving within the hour. All hands to battle stations. Garrus, Tali, and Noble Six will report to the shuttle bay. Good luck, everyone." Shepard cut the mic and left the two standing, in silence.

"It sounds like we better get our asses moving, Garrus" Six said with a shrug. "So much for some rest."

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* * *

><p>Author's Note:<p>

I realize this chapter was cut a bit short; I did this to get it updated. I just want to remind everyone that reads this that I do in fact intend on finishing. I'm hoping to have Mass Effect 2 finished up this summer.

The first person to find the Skyfall reference gets five Internet points. And just in case anyone wonder, no I don't intend to have anything from James Bond in this story. I just think it was a fun line for the moment.

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* * *

><p>Revision Notes:<p>

Thanks to an observant reader, I was able to catch myself regarding a mistake in dialogue with Jacob and Six. Originally, I had Jacob unaware of Leliana, and he treated her as a VI. I had mixed up my notes on which crew members know about her, and have since revised the discussion to fit the rest of the story. If anyone notices mistakes like this, please don't hesitate to point them out to me.

I also fixed a few grammatical errors, if anyone else is as much a nitpicker as I can be.

Thanks for reading, as always. This may be my story, but I love being able to write something that others can enjoy as much as I do. I never promise to add any suggestions, but I'm always willing to hear them. Several of the more important parts of this story were taken directly from readers.

16. Collectors

"So, a Collector ship stranded out in space? From what I've heard about these things, it doesn't seem like one of their ships just gets knocked out by a Turian Cruiser" Six said as he left the elevator, talking to Garrus and Tali as they all walked towards the shuttle. "Are you two really buying this?"

"It sounds like you doubt what the Hierarchy is capable of, Six. I'm insultedâ€|" Garrus answered with a smirk on his face. "If a Human ship had done this, you'd be completely onboard with it."

"Very funny, Garrus. You know what I'm talking about, though. This sounds a little too convenient to be true. You two think what you want, but I'm going to be watching my back while we're in there. I'm not going to end up in one of those stasis pods you've told me about."

"Don't throw me in with Garrus! I'm thinking the same thing as you, Six" interrupted Tali. "You're right, this doesn't seem to make sense. I'm keeping my shotgun close the whole mission" she said, patting the gun holstered on her back. "I'm sure Shepard agrees with us, Lieutenant. Speaking of, where is he? He was supposed to meet us at the shuttle."

"He sent me a message about coming down in a few minutes or so; said it was something about getting some weapon upgrades from Jacob first, for the mission" replied Garrus. "And actually, I agree with both of you; I just wanted to give the Lieutenant a hard time. I've served on a lot Turian ships, and I know for a fact that one of our cruisers wouldn't take down a Collector ship, even with a surprise attack. I think it's going to be a trap."

"If we've been wondering about it, then I'm sure Shepard has. He's alwaysâ€|"

"Always what?" Shepard asked, interrupting Tali as he walked out of the elevator.

The three friends all looked at each other for a moment, silently arguing with each other over who would answer Shepard. Tali and Garrus both looked at Six, bluntly letting him that he was the one to inform the commander.

"On top of things, Shepard. We were just talking about how we feel this mission is a set-up. We don't think the Turians would be able to knock out a Collector ship; it's a trap. If it was really knocked out, wouldn't it have called for a rescue? The report you sent us from the Illusive Man said it's been idle for hours. That's plenty of

time for a rescue mission."

"I've already thought about that too, everyone" Shepard said with just a hint of concern on his face. "This is too convenient; I even mentioned it to the Illusive Man. We both agreed on it, but the potential payoff is too valuable to pass up on. That's why I want to go in with a small team, and no one else, for this one. Miranda wanted to come with, but I need her here if anything goes wrong. Tali and Garrus: you've been with me since the beginning, and I know we can work well together, going into something so unknown" he said to the two with a smile. "As for you, Lieutenant" Shepard said as he walked over to the Spartan "You may be new, but I have no doubts about you anymore. When you thought you were giving up your life for a member of my crew, I knew we were right to bring you on the Normandy. We all need to be able to do that, if the time comes." Shepard said the last part with a nod to the Spartan.

"Iâ€| yes sir. I'm with you on this one."

"Good, enough about that. Grab your gear and let's load up in the shuttle. Joker should be taking the Normandy out of FTL any minute, and we'll be right on top of the Collectors. I want to be in and out fast, nice and clean." Shepard led the group to the shuttle, the Cerberus pilot waiting for them at its hatch.

"We just exited FTL, Shepard" Joker said over the shuttle's comm system. "The Collector ship is right in front of us; I'll pull alongside it. It looks like there's a hull breach you should be able to land in. I'll mark it with the ship's floodlight."

"Thanks, Joker. Alright everyone, this is it."

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* * *

><p>"This place is a mess" Six said, looking at the bottom of his boot. The floor of the Collector ship was covered in something he could only describe as 'slimy.' "The Collectors actually have this stuff in their ship on purpose? I can't wait to meet them" he said with a hint of sarcasm.<p>

"From what we've seen so far, you might not get the chance, Lieutenant" Shepard said, leading the group past another pile of Human bodies. "EDI, keep running a sweep of the Collector ship; I want to know why we haven't seen any yet, alive or otherwise."

"Of course, Shepard: I will run a background program for it, as I am still trying to locate an access point for the central computer. I will let you know when I have an answer for either" said EDI, chiming in over the teams' radio.

"Why do you think the Collectors are throwing piles of Human bodies around?" asked Garrus. "It doesn't make much sense to me. You'd think they'd be bothered by the stenchâ€|"

"They're probably from experiments; once they were used, they aren't useful anymore." Tali spoke as she was crouched, examining one of the piles with her Omni-tool.

"Sure, but why wouldn't they have a better way to dispose of them? Even throwing them off into space would be better than having a pile of rotting bodies."

"Or we're just not seeing why they're really here?" said Six. "Maybe there's more to it. Their technology seems to be organic, so it might make sense."

"We won't figure it out from here; come on, let's go" Shepard ordered, as the other three fell in behind him.

Six was the last in line, moving a little slower than the others. He was more focused on the ship than the mission. The design of it reminded him of the reports on the Flood: the organic masses everywhere, the same dull yellow, the slight cloud haze in the air, the slime. Lucky for him, he already knew the Collectors were the ones that were on this ship. "Commander, I never saw in the mission brief what exactly are we looking for here?"

"That's because we don't have a specific target; we just need all the information we can get on the Omega-4 relay. While we don't know for sure what happens to them, every ship that enters it stays on the other side; no one has travelled it and returned to tell what happened. We suspect the Collectors, and Reapers, have some sort of access codes to it. We need those if we're going to hit their home world. A Collector ship stranded in space seems like the best place to look."

"Hmmm, got it, sir. Do you want my, um, VI to scan the ship too?"

Shepard looked over his shoulder, just slightly enough to show he knew what the Lieutenant was talking about. "Yea, that sounds good. See if it can find anything useful, like ship schematics; I'm tired of wandering around here without anywhere to go."

"You heard the man, Lel. Find us something useful" said Six, his external audio switched off momentarily. "

"I've been doing that already, Six. Tell Shepard to take a right up ahead, at the next fork. I think I see a medical station, if I'm reading the Collector schematics right" said Leliana, appearing in the corner of his new visor. "Do you like the new display? This is what you were missing out on when you didn't take the Gen 2 armor upgrades."

"Yea, it actually is pretty nice seeing you on a mission for once" he said to her. "Shepard, take the next right up ahead" he stated, switching back to normal audio. "There should be a med lab down that hall."

"Shepard" Tali said in a way that hinted she was about to ask for something "How come we don't all have Vis in our suits? It sounds like it's pretty useful for Six."

"Hmph" Shepard said grumpily "Talk to Miranda about that. I don't decide the budget."

"Miranda would never" "

"Hey, look up aheadâ€¦ it's that med bay Six was talking about" Garrus stated.

Up a small incline, the team could see several computer stations and what appeared to be operating tables. On several of the tables, collector pods were sitting open.

"Good, I'm glad we're making some progress" answered Shepard. "Let's go see what the Collectors left for us."

"Right behind you, Shepard" Tali and Garrus said in unison.

Six just looked at them both for a few moments, having a puzzled look behind his helmet. The other two obviously sensed his confusion.

"When you serve on the Normandy long enough Six, you'll be saying it with us" said Tali.

The four of them continued moving, walking up the ramp to the medical station that Leliana had found. It was a much more open room than the cramped hallways they had been walking through, with an ample amount of lighting. Several more of the Collector pods were strewn about the room, seemingly unorganized. Shepard walked over and discovered a Collector body in it.

"So that's what these things look likeâ€¦" stated Six. After he studied it for a moment, he turned and walked over to another console and started scanning it. "Leliana, can you hack into their systems to see if you can find anything useful?"

"Of course, Six: Setting up the bridge nowâ€¦" she said, her holographic image once again appearing in the corner of his helmet. "Hmmm, I can't find much on how the ship ended up like this. There's a small amount of data regarding the Turian attack, but nothing useful. No warnings or alerts, just a small broadcast across the ship as the Turians started attacking. It seemed more like an announcement of some kind; this Collector code is difficult to read."

"Alright, thanks Leliana. Anything else standing out to you?"

"Just one thing; the ship's security systems are still online. It's been tracking us since we arrived. I'd let Shepard know."

His suspicions about the mission seemingly confirmed, Six walked over to speak with the others, and to see what they had found out from the dead Collector. "Shepard, I managed to hack into the ship's systems, and access the security network. It's been tracking us ever since we boarded."

"I knew something felt off about this missionâ€¦" Tali said in a concerned voice.

"Even so, we've come too far to just walk away. Just keep alert. Learn anything else, Six?" asked Shepard.

"Just that the Collectors didn't seem too worried when the Turians attacked. The ship broadcasted one message when it happened, but it didn't seem like any kind of real alert. It really looks like there's more to this. Anyways, what did you three find?"

"Are you ready for a big surprise?" asked Garrus.

"Garrus, remember what I've been through to get here?"

"Right" the turian chuckled. "Well, EDI ran some tests on the Collector DNA and figured out where it came from"

"And?"

"It's a modified Prothean, Six. You know, the aliens that most of the galaxy thinks built the Citadel and the Relays? The Reapers must have enslaved some of them before wiping the rest out in the last cycle."

"That's disturbing" Six said, trailing off. "You're telling me this is what Protheans looked like?"

"No. EDI's tests show that the Reapers dramatically changed them" said Tali. "Whatever the real Protheans looked like, this isn't it. The Collectors have many of their internal organs replaced with Reaper tech, making them more powerful in combat; the changes are especially noticeable in their central nervous system. But it also seems to make them dependent on the tech."

"What does that mean?" asked the Lieutenant

"We aren't quite sure of that yet. EDI and Mordin are working on it" said Shepard. "Right now, we need to keep moving, and find a central command station; if we don't find how the Collectors use the Omega-4 relay, this entire mission will have been for nothing. Lieutenant, keep scanning the ship for any other useful locations, and take point."

"Got it" Six said, as he moved to take the lead. Just as they left the medical stations, he noticed a pile of weapons lying by a locker. "Hey Shepard, there are a few weapons sitting here; need to learn to shoot something new?"

"You think picking up a new gun magically makes someone learn how to use a new type of weapon? That's ridiculous, Six. Keep moving" Shepard said, shaking his head in amusement.

The Spartan just smirked behind his visor, once again turning and walking down the corridor. In the next room they found opened up to a large ceiling, covered in a familiar sight.

"Look at all the pods on the walls and the ceiling" Tali said, slowing down to take in the disturbing sight.

"I detect no signs of life in the pods Shepard" EDI said, coming in over the team's radio channel. "I suspect that the colonists that were being held in them died when the ship was attacked; much of the power grid throughout the ship has been offline since we discovered it. I do not see any way to help the colonists."

"No, there isn't anything we can do for them now" Shepard said. "The best we can do is to keep the Collectors from grabbing more people. Keep leading, Six."

The Spartan nodded and kept walking, staying alert of what was around him. Just as he was beginning to wonder where he was headed, Leliana popped up. "Six, the next pathway ahead will take you out into the ship's central chamber. From there, we have a short walk to what I think is a control station where EDI can access the ship's main systems; she should be able to figure out how we can use the Omega-4 relay from there."

"Thanks, Leliana. Any signs of the Collectors, yet?"

"Still nothing. I'll keep looking, though." She flickered off of his HUD again, and Six kept leading the group through the ship.

"This way will take us to a control station" he said to everyone. "It's in the ship's center. EDI can access the ship's main systems from there. I think. It's just through this next openingâ€¦" He trailed off when they walked up another ramp, leading them into the heart of the ship.

"Keelahâ€¦" Tali said, as she looked around.

"By the spiritsâ€¦ This is bad, Shepard" Garrus said, shocked by what he saw. "They must have millions of pods in this ship. There's no way they're going to stop at the Terminus Systems."

"Where are the biggest Human colonies?" asked Six.

"We're still new on the galactic scene, Lieutenant" answered Shepard. "We don't have too many large, established colonies. Aside from a few, like Eden Prime and Bekenstein, Earth is still by far the largest Human populated planet."

"â€¦And they're going to target it" finished Tali. "With their seeker-swarm tech, the Collectors could easily land at a city, grab the population, and get out before the Alliance could respond."

"Not if we stop them first, Tali" answered Shepard. "Come on people; I think I see that control station the lieutenant was talking about. Follow me."

Six kept looking around for a few moments before following the others. He just wanted to think about what he was really doing; Leliana must have sensed his concern. "It's really starting to sink in, isn't it?" she asked.

"What do you mean, Lel?"

"What's at stake here: Until now, we didn't really know what we were helping them with. We knew about the Collectors, yes, but seeing them now is different; it's not just another mission. I can only imagine how all the people trapped in those pods felt, with no way out. What if they were awake, or in pain? In a way, though, it's nice knowing we can do something to help. If we help stop the Collectors, then this whole mess will have been worth it. We might as well do something if we're staying here, no?"

"Yea, I guess you're right. I suppose there's no going back, huh? Kind of makes me want to just go find somewhere to live on Earth and hide" he said with a smirk. "But like you saidâ€¦ might as well do something good while we're here."

"And maybe try something new, hmmm?" she said with a smile, rolling her eyes to the side of her holographic image in Tali's direction.

"Yeaâ€|" he answered with a smile, forgetting his usual response of dismissal just long enough for her to catch him. "Well, might as well, I mean."

"Mmhmm" she answered, forming a playful smile across her face.

"Just keep scanning the area, Lel" he said bitterly. "Looks like Shepard has EDI connected to the system, so keep us covered."

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><p>"EDI, what have you got so far?" asked Joker as he looked over some of the data in front of him. "I'm not seeing anything useful."<p>

"Please be patient Jeff. The number of firewalls I'm attempting to bypass is making it very difficult to work any quicker."

"Hmph" answered the pilot. Joker sat back in his chair, looking out of the Normandy's windows at the Collector ship. Remembering a past event, he decided to ask EDI another question. "Hey EDI, run an analysis on the ship's EM profile for me, would you?"

After just a few moments, the AI answered him "Here are the results, Jeff."

"I thought so" he said, looking them over. "Hey Shepard" he said over the comm channel. "EDI just ran a scan on the Collector ship for me, you need to hear this."

"Shepard, I ran an analysis on the Collector ship's EM profile; it is an exact match of the one the original Normandy picked up on the ship that attacked you two years ago."

"The same ship's been chasing me this whole time?" asked Shepard over the radio. "This is way beyond coincidence. The others were right; this _has_ to be a trap."

"Keep your eyes open Shepard, something is definitely wrong with this one" said Joker. "Hang on there for just another minute; I think EDI's making some progress."

"Let me know when you find something, EDI. I want to beâ€|" Shepard was cut off by a violent shake as the platform they were standing on quickly started to rise in the air, sending both Garrus and Tali to the floor. Six was quick enough to stay on his feet, but even he was thrown off-balance for a moment.

"Shepard, I have detected multiple bio-signs on the platforms nearby. I am unsure how they eluded my sensors, but they are moving towards your position" EDI said over the team's radio. "I am still in their system, but I need time to analyze the information I have. Please

hold the platform until I advise you otherwise."

"On your feet, everyone!" barked Shepard, as he drew the assault rifle from his back. He slid into some cover in the front of their platform, and looked over the edge to see several platforms with collectors on them, all moving towards their position. "This is it. Aim careful, and conserve ammo. We don't know how long it will take for EDI to finish."

Six grabbed Tali's hand to help her up, while Garrus jumped up quickly on his own while drawing his sniper rifle. The lieutenant drew his own rifle, snuck behind some cover with Tali, and aimed over the wall at the collectors moving towards them. The two nodded to each other, ready to work as a team. A moment later, Six felt the collectors' platform connect to their own, and he pulled the trigger.

He was ready to show the collectors how a Spartan fights.

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><p>And he's not dead, after all! Sorry for the delay; thank graduating college and getting a real job for it. I'll try to get the second-half of the collector ship up in less than eight months, this time.<p>

I kept this one short to get something new up. The next update will finish the collector ship, and maybe develop Tali and Six's relationship a bit more.

Thanks for sticking with me, and let me know what I can do to improve.

End
file.